

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### RIGHT EFFORT

Venerable Sona was having a crisis of doubt. He had followed the Buddha's teaching, practicing with earnestness and ardor, doing sitting and walking meditation day and night. In fact, he walked with such resoluteness that he had lacerated his feet, and his path in the forest was splattered with blood. Still, his heart was heavy with discontent; he despaired of ever breaking free from the shackles of ego consciousness. He began to think that it would be better for him to give up the life of a monk and return to his friends and family. "At least," he thought, "I could be of value to others." According to the story in the *Vinaya*, the Buddha was able to read Sona's thoughts and knew that his disciple was in despair. So the Buddha came to where Sona was walking and asked him to sit and talk.

The Buddha knew that his disciple was an accomplished musician, so he asked him, "Is it true that before you took the vow of poverty, you played the lute with skill?" Sona replied, "It is so, Master." The Buddha then asked, "When you stringed the lute too tight, did it make a beautiful sound?" Sona replied, "No, Master. The sound was shrill, and tense." "Ah," the Buddha responded. "And when you stringed the lute too slack, did it make a pleasing sound?" "Not at all, Master. When the strings were too loose it made an unpleasant sound." "So how did the lute sound when it was tuned just right?" Sona replied, "It made a beautiful sound, Master."

Then the Buddha gently said to his disciple, "Sona, your practice must be just like this. If you practice with too much zeal,

your practice will be like the strings of the lute tuned too tight; if you practice with not enough zeal, you will sink into sluggishness, and you will lose all mindfulness. If your practice is evenly tuned, it will be like a lute that makes beautiful music.”

With the Buddha’s wise words in his heart, Sona returned to his practice. He was able to tune his mind and body “just right” – not too tight and not too loose. According to the story, his mind soon awakened, and he entered the Stream. His heart was free; his mind was liberated. He knew for certain, “destroyed is rebirth for me; lived will be the holy life; done is my task.”

Venerable Sona’s story is a perfect introduction to the sixth step of the Eightfold Path: Right Effort. Unfortunately, tuning ourselves is much more complicated than tuning a musical instrument. Yuanwu, the great teacher of Ta Hui, said, “If you want to attain Intimacy, the first thing is, don’t seek it.” He also said, “Be at rest wherever you are, and carry on the secret, closely continuous, intimate-level practice.” How can one strive without striving? How can one be at rest and at the same time apply Right Effort? For over two thousand years, enlightened Buddhist masters have referred to our practice as “effortless effort” or “endeavorless endeavor.” The Tibetans say that we must “hasten slowly.” As we study Right Effort together, let us try to hold the paradox that *we* are the instrument to be tuned, and that the balance between too tight and too loose is delicate indeed.

With the sixth step, we begin the third division of the Eightfold Path. As noted previously, the Path begins with seeing a glimpse of reality. I tend to think of this as “sudden awakening,” mentioned by the Ch’an school of Buddhism. It may not be a Hollywood moment of lights, music and the heavens opening; instead it may be a subtle shift in the mind, like a spring breeze. Something turns, and we are led toward this path. Who can say what that something is? It seems as if some people only need a tiny glimpse of the truth, a small shaft of light

momentarily dispelling the darkness in order to see the path ahead. That small beam of light initiates Right Understanding, and its reflection in Right Thought.

The second part of the Path is divided into three middle steps: Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood. These three steps continue an inexorable process of moving from the unreal to the Real, like ripples spreading out from a pebble dropped into a pond. These are the manifestations of the harmony between Right Understanding and Right Thought. From the balance of those two, comes our practice in the world: our speech, behavior and livelihood. The third and last part of the Eightfold Path completes the circle. I think of it as the “how to” part of the practice, the meditation part.

It is intriguing to consider the fact that the Buddha placed these “how to” steps last, particularly since he was so clear that meditation is the *via regia*, or royal road to liberation. This is particularly important in today’s world where many people come to meditation with absolutely no interest in its context, but clearly the Buddha indicated that meditation comes *after* Right Understanding, not before it. Again, I take this to be the essence of the Ch’an insistence that sudden awakening precedes cultivation. This insight of the Chinese masters was a radical departure from the classical Theravadin approach of cultivation preceding awakening.

Without the context, meditation can become another “feel good” technique, a way to manage pain, or improve psychological functioning. Surely, finding some equanimity with chronic pain or mental disturbance cannot to be discounted as an unworthy goal, and surely the Buddha was a physician who offered medication to fit the illness. Sometimes an aspirin is all that is needed. But it is hard to believe that the Buddha spent the last forty-five years of his life merely teaching people how to improve their lives. As he often said, “I teach suffering and the

end of suffering.” Curing the disease of ignorance was his singular goal. So he placed meditation last, resting it on the shoulders of prajna (wisdom) and sila (virtue), the first two parts of the Eightfold Path. They prepare the journey and provide the context.

There seems to be a common agreement among a majority of contemporary teachers to call the third part of the Eightfold Path “the concentration division,” but I prefer to call it the meditation division, which puts me in excellent company indeed. Many of the greatest Ch’an masters referred to the last three spokes of the wheel as the *dhyana* section, dhyana being the Sanskrit word for meditation.

Although Right Effort is a vital part of the earlier steps such as Right Thought and Right Speech, it makes good sense to place Right Effort in the “how to” section of the Eightfold Path since it is so crucial to the practice of meditation. Certainly that is what the Buddha was explaining to Sona. Anyone struggling with sloth and torpor - or “sloth and torture” as one meditator put it – and 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 by the fingernails - to endure until the blessed and despised bell rings.

Speaking of enduring, someone once told me a story about a teenager who escaped from Germany just before the Nazi darkness descended across Europe in the late 1930’s. Georg 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, sharing a one-room apartment during the war. Eventually Georg 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 groups

from different synagogues. What lesson does he hope they will take from his story? “You must endure and learn the language.” Could there be a better description of the cultural wisdom that has guided Jewish people for thousands of years?

This is precisely what the Buddha’s transcendent vision of truth has done for over twenty-five centuries. It has endured. But unlike many other wisdom traditions, it has done much more. Like Georg and his family, Buddhism learned to speak Chinese, along with many subsequent cultural languages and intelligences. As it spread from India into China, it translated itself completely into the Chinese culture, melding with the Tao and eventually emerging as Ch’an. It also morphed into Zen in Japan, Son in Korea and Vajrayana in Tibet. Astonishingly, it was able to incorporate the unique genius of each new culture into its very core as it took root in foreign lands. It literally changed, and yet its essence remained unchanged.

Everything, including each of us, has its own unique language. When the essence is fully heard, it flowers and opens to the other. When we learn the language of the other it bows deeply and speaks to us in its own voice. Too often our desperate need to be listened to prevents us from listening. Our bottomless need to be seen prevents us from seeing. This is the universal tragedy of narcissism. We shout to be heard and seen, never stopping to look or listen. As we study the Eightfold Path, we must continually remember that our task is to learn a new language. To endure and learn the language perfectly describes the meaning of Right Effort.

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. As we study these four endeavors, let us keep in mind the paradox: *We* are the instrument. We must somehow rest in the midst of work, and, as the great poet Basho said, we must “do enough, without striving.”

## 1) The effort to avoid

According to Patanjali, the famous codifier of the yogic sutras, yoga is the control or cessation of mental fluctuations, *yogash chitta vritti nirodha*. The fifth limb of Pantajali's eight-limbed yoga system is *pratyahara*, withdrawal of the senses - the stage where a yogi learns to control the six senses. Undoubtedly, the Buddha was an accomplished yogi, and it is not surprising that he also emphasized controlling the six sense spheres. Indeed, sense restraint is one of the contemplations in the Fourth Foundation of Mindfulness, where the yogi is asked to direct attention to the six sense spheres, both internal and external, and to the fetters (shackles) constantly arising and tying us down.

He knows the eye, he knows forms, and he knows the fetter that arises dependent on both, and he also knows how an unarisen fetter can arise, how an arisen fetter can be removed, and how a future arising of the removed fetter can be prevented.

The passage continues with the Buddha listing the ear and sounds, the nose and odors, etc. He ends with the sixth sense:

He knows the mind, he knows mind-objects, and he knows the fetter that arises dependent on both, and he also knows how an unarisen fetter can arise, how an arisen fetter can be removed, and how a future arising of the removed fetter can be prevented.

Sense restraint is the first line of defense against a fetter rising.

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.

“Strains his mind and struggles” sounds alien to our Western sensibilities. We go to yoga to relax, and we sit in meditation to empty our minds. We take medication to calm our anxious minds and bodies. Psychologists tell us that repression is often the cause of anxiety, and we are told to relax, not strain our minds. But remember the Mahayana term upaya, or skillful means. It tells us that the Buddha offered specific medication for specific diseases. The effort to avoid is one of those specific medications. Ch’an master Yang-shan explains upaya 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.

The effort to avoid is the medicine for someone very close to the edge of disaster. 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 final look. So she looked back at her wild, exciting city and turned into a pillar of salt. If ever anyone needed the effort to avoid, it was Lot’s wife. A person desperately struggling with an addiction most likely does not need to hear high-toned Buddhist concepts about non-duality or no self. She probably doesn’t even need to have someone tell her to chant the metta prayer, sending lovingkindness to herself and others. If she is hanging by her fingernails, trying to get through what feels like an endlessly long day without a drink or hit of pot to take the edge off, what she may need from Yang-shan’s general

store is the effort to avoid.

Most of us are far too sophisticated to take the story of Lot's wife seriously; it's just an old Biblical story, and whoever heard of a person turning to salt? Yet, imagine the numberless people who, like Lot's wife, have taken just one more peek, never again to have a moment of mindfulness or sunlight. This is the genius of the Buddha's first great effort. Sometimes, our only hope is to summon sheer will power and through heroic effort repress the destructive urge before it can gain power in the conscious mind.

Here is a version of the oft-told story about a guy walking down the street and falling 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 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, this time he sees the hole up ahead and walks carefully around it. With a thud, he falls into the same hole! Crawling out, without even the semblance of right thought, he manages to limp home.

The next day, if he has a shred of good sense, he will *take another route*.

If there is a hole that has some mysterious magnet in it, and if

you keep falling in that same hole, it is best to avoid that road altogether. This is the bottom line of the effort to avoid. It requires great humility and tremendous honesty. You choose another route, because you accept the truth that you are powerless in that situation. Perhaps others can walk down that street without falling into that particular hole. Perhaps some people can drink at a party without getting completely soused. Perhaps some people can indulge in wrong thoughts or mean speech or gossip and come out smelling like a rose. Perhaps some people can smoke pot without dulling their consciousness and becoming psychologically addicted, or overeat one weekend without gaining back the 20 pounds it took six months to lose. 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 a day that will turn out to be our last one on earth. If we don’t choose a new road now, when will we? Yuanwu says it best. “If you are stopping now, then stop. If you seek a time when you finish, there will never be a time when you finish.”

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 doors of the eyes, of the ears, of smell, of taste and of touch. And most definitely, we need to guard the door of thinking, which is the most seductive of the six senses. Without a measure of control, there is no possible way for the mind to learn how to meditate. This is why on meditation retreats we are asked to keep our eyes turned downward, to walk slowly, and to be mindful of hearing. This is the practice of pratyahara, teaching the mind to avoid the “six thieves,” bandits relentlessly robbing us of our mindfulness. In learning to restrain the six senses we are practicing the Buddha’s first great endeavor, the effort to avoid.

## 2) The effort to overcome

After we have fallen into a hole, it is clearly a little late to practice the effort to avoid. As the saying goes, it's pointless to close the barn door after the horses have escaped. Now our attention must redirect itself to the second great endeavor, the effort to overcome. If the horse is out of the barn, we need to find him and bring him back. As we sit in meditation and the hindrance of sloth and torpor envelopes us with its incredibly debilitating power, or if we have fallen into the holes of greed or hatred, restlessness or doubt, our strongest ally is to recognize that we are, in fact, sitting squarely on our behinds in a big hole.

Again, the Buddha says that we must strain our mind! The enemy is no longer knocking at the door; it is sitting in the living room. "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 points us toward a truth that is unbelievably simple: It is mind that must control the mind. The mind, or mindlessness, led us into a hole, and it is the mind that will rescue us. But of course, our shadow side, also the mind, whispers, "What's so terrible about feeling so sleepy, darling? You've worked so hard at this retreat all day long; don't you deserve a little rest?" We may quietly and somewhat furtively head for bed. Why not? There's always tomorrow.

There are times when 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. Western psychology urges us to work with uncomfortable feelings, bringing them into consciousness. In the context of psychological work, this means that we are willing to get into the content, the personal story. Many of us have experienced strong emotions while sitting in meditation,

perhaps for the first time in our lives. In fact, it may be the only opportunity some of us have to recognize grief and sorrow or the anger that has been repressed for most of our lives. Surely if this is what we need to be experiencing at this point in our process, it is as appropriate on the cushion as in a therapist's office.

Earlier, I mentioned U Pandita's suggestion that we Western students tend to "do therapy" rather than meditating. It is vital to remember that U Pandita comes from a culture that does not necessarily understand what it means for Westerners to "do therapy." I use the word "psychologize" not in a pejorative sense but in terms of our capacity to process symbolically in a uniquely Western context. Psychologically, we understand that a child may also be sitting on the same cushion as our supposed adult and spiritual self. To ignore this psychic reality, attempting to stuff it and other unconscious contents into Buddhist concepts such as sunyata (emptiness) and anatta (no self) can be disastrous. I mention Chogyam Trungpa as only one of many examples of truly great Buddhist teachers who were emotionally undeveloped. Wounded and fragile parts of the ego cannot and will not march in the Enlightenment Parade.

If Buddhism is to survive and flourish in the West, it will do so only by embracing what is uniquely wise in the West, just as it embraced the profound wisdom of the Tao and the unique genius of China. To think of Western psychology as a "lesser" or inferior path and something a Buddhist teacher needs to recommend only when a student exhibits psychological problems is to miss the point entirely. Perhaps it is true that we have produced no Buddha in the West, but neither has the East produced a Freud or a Jung. This is not an insignificant point of difference. I would suggest that our Western emphasis on the equality of men and women comes directly from a psychological maturation that still lags in the East, and our capacity to "do therapy" has something to do with our psychological maturation. Spiritual awakening can occur in the blink of an eye, but an adult is created, if it is

created at all, over many decades of hard work. The Buddhist Sangha may still get away with placing women in inferior roles in Thailand or Burma, but the clock is ticking on how long this attitude will be acceptable in the West. Also, how are we to ignore the long shadow Buddhism has cast in the East, where it has lived-far too comfortably and far too long alongside cruel and oppressive regimes?

There is always the other side of the coin, however. U Pandita's suggestion that meditation is not the place for psychologizing must not be dismissed out of hand. Perhaps some meditators, those who have attained a psychologically stable ego, are ready to move beyond our typical mode of psychological processing. This falls in the territory of meditation as a radical method of deconstructing one's personal story. One who is ready to leave the content of the personal story, is ready to open to a vast world where liberation is no longer merely a concept. This is the meaning of being led from the unreal to the Real.

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 whose words hurt your feelings, but you had completely put it out of your mind until this moment, sitting on the cushion. 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. One single memory can lead to a stream of psychological insights. If you are committed to practicing Right Effort, you may face a most interesting dilemma. Could it be possible that the psychological processing stemming from your awareness of why you are feeling depressed is nothing more than resistance to letting go of thoughts? In this circumstance, our very ability to process psychologically can become the ego's most brilliant defense.

A hole can, in fact, become a nest. In this case, we find a tremendous challenge facing us 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. Sometimes I suspect that psychological processing, which may be our greatest strength, is also 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 the process 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. Rest assured, if that thought fish wants to swim back to your boat, 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. Sometimes, we spend thirty minutes sitting in meditation, having a delicious thought meal.

If we understand that psychological processing can become another hindrance to the work of meditation, we are then called to summon the Buddha's second great effort. We must gather our strength, strain our mind and overcome our psychological processing, no matter how counter-intuitive it seems. We must try to release the content of our thoughts, moment by moment, or as one great teacher said, "Put it down!" Perhaps we can 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. 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 not only must we weed our garden; we have to keep the ox from trampling on the fragile green plants emerging from the soil.

The first two efforts fall in the category of enduring, straining your mind when sheer will power is all that will get you through. Now, with the garden 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 the 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 awakening: 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. 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 an enlightened teacher

have the ability to give us these seven seeds. They already belong to us and are part of our own essence. 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?

Like the first two efforts, this third effort to develop makes sense. I have to give up other plans in the afternoon in order to attend a Sunday sit. Let's say that Sunday afternoons are when I look forward to visiting my parents or siblings. Perhaps it is the time when I most look forward to walking on the beach and relaxing before starting my busy week again. Even if I make the time, I still may resist going to the Sunday sit. The effort to develop involves my willingness to sit 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. The effort to develop is about hanging in there and taking care of the garden through all kinds of weather.

The very fact that you are reading a chapter on Right Effort means that you are putting energy into the effort to develop. Studying the scriptures, listening to recordings of meditation teachers or reading their words are other obvious ways to put energy into the effort to develop the heart and mind. Finally, if we are really fortunate, we may find a teacher we can trust and in whom we have confidence. There are stories of Buddhist teachers who came to enlightenment without the benefit and guidance of a living master. One of my favorite teachers Chinul, the great Korean master, had two profound moments of awakening from reading enlightened scriptures. Perhaps, just hearing a word or phrase can open our hearts to realization. The story of Hui Neng

who awakened when he overheard someone recite a Buddhist sutra comes to mind. He had to hear the sutra because he was illiterate. How was this possible? His true teacher was the jewel within the lotus of his own heart. It is true of each of us.

Still, because of the power of habit, of conditioned consciousness that has enveloped us like thick clouds, most of us need the guidance of a living teacher, someone 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 a resonating and healing effect on the consciousness of those sitting near her. Countless people report feeling more clarity and tranquility after sitting near the Dalai Lama. I have heard of people who report that their lives were changed from the experience of sitting near an enlightened master. 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 *Zen Letters*, Yuanwu gives a remarkable description of finding a teacher:

If you have set your will on this, you do not calculate how long the journey will take. In establishing your will, you must be independent and deadly serious, and succeed in cutting clear through. With bold and sharp body and mind, put down your baggage and take refuge with a teacher whose techniques are as deadly as a dog biting a boar. Wholeheartedly set before him the knowledge and opinions that are sticking to your flesh, all the explanations and theories you have accumulated in your previous studies.

He 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 ego’s 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.

#### **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 had believed that we can never lose what we have gained through our practice. In the

sense of many lifetimes it may be true that we don't really lose the ground we have gained. But what about this 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 starting a garden if you are not in it from start to finish? The effort to maintain is being in it for the long haul.

There is one more element that is vital to maintaining the garden of our practice. We need to find other people who are also interested in gardening. In a world that is so separated from the spirit, it is very difficult 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 necessary and so very wonderful. When we come together and sit in silence as one, there is a palpable sense of communion and support. It feels very much like tending to our garden.

This is Chuang Tzu's meaning when he says that we cannot rent our garden from someone else:

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.

The Buddha says that we have to strain our minds in our effort to develop and maintain as well to avoid and overcome. 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. We mentioned earlier the Tibetan saying that we must hasten slowly, which is another way of articulating the paradox that it is not this, but it is not that either. Paradox runs throughout the Buddha dharma. In *The Blue Cliff Records*, Yuanwu 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 Absolute, there is no such thing as good and evil, and the highest truth is that both are true! In conventional truth we must strain our minds. In the real truth, there is nothing to strain.

Lama Gendun Rinpoche says:

Happiness cannot be found  
through great effort and will power,  
but is already here, right now,  
in relaxation and letting-go.  
Don't strain yourself, there is nothing to do...  
Only our searching for happiness prevents us from  
seeing it.  
It is like a rainbow which you run after without  
ever catching it.

In a talk transcribed by Judy Gilbert, Norman Fischer says that the first thing we need to do is let go of the idea that we can do anything! This is the timeless wisdom that Zen offers to the classical Theravada tradition. It humanizes our approach to Right Effort.

So this is the first thing that we need to recognize. To just let go and relax, knowing that we really can't do it. None of our efforts will bear fruit. This tells us that practice is less about what we are going to do, than about what we undo, what we try to let go of. Practice is shedding something, rather than adding something extra. We have added, already, plenty of extra things, a lifetime of extras. That's the problem. We don't need any more extras. We need to let go of something. So practice is not doing. Practice is undoing.

There is nothing we can do with the paradox of "don't strain your mind" and the Buddha's clear instruction that "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 - as the Buddha gently taught Sona. Perhaps we should call the Buddha's teaching of Right Effort The Goldilock's Law: Our effort cannot be too hot nor can it be too cold. Basho says it best:

Do enough without striving.  
Be living, not dying.  
From wonder to wonder  
Existence opens.  
Simply trust.  
Do not petals flutter down  
Just like that?

In one passage of the Pali Scriptures, the Buddha talks about

the raft that each one of us must build. This is the raft that will carry us to the further shore. He does not suggest that we rent a boat or hitch a ride on someone else's raft. We must construct the boat with our own two hands.

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?'

This raft does not have an inboard motor speeding it across the deep water. Nor does it have a sail to catch the wind. We have only one means of moving this raft across the four floods of sensuality, becoming, views and ignorance. We must 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, and the Buddha's simile tells us that our raft is unique. It is constructed out of whatever is presently available in this life, here and now. The "grass, twigs, branches and leaves" are the stuff of our own personal experience.

When the Buddha sat under the bodhi tree, he made a vow not to get up until he had completely awakened. He said:

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 express what is most rare in the human spirit: a yearning for the Real and a willingness to commit to the magnificent quest of stripping consciousness down to its very essence. This is Right Effort.