

5. Diligence, Part 1

June 3, 2017

Drop In to Diligence Retreat

Diligence is a pleasant word, isn't it. It rolls off the tongue nicely, and it has a good feel about it, don't you think? Diligent people are responsible, respectable people. Maybe not the most interesting in the world, but certainly worthy.

Energy. Now that's a different story. That's a Sedona word. If we lived in Cambridge Massachusetts, Energy would be defined by the amount of newtons acting on an object multiplied by the distance over which the object is moved. But we live in Flagstaff, so the word *energy* has all sorts of indefinable mystical connotations.

Both of these are preferable to *effort*. The very sound of the word is self-defeating. If I say this talk is about effort, you'll probably all feel inadequate before I've even finished the introduction.

All three of these words have been used to translate the word *virya*, which is the fifth of the Most Excellent Practices. Whichever word I choose to use in this talk will influence your relationship to the practice because of the baggage that comes with it. And there's no real final academic decision on it that I can fall back on. To make matters worse each of those three words, *diligence*, *energy*, and *effort*, also have other *Pali* words that are rendered such in English in other contexts. In short, I have to admit to not having the expertise or authority to chose a preferred English translation for this Most Excellent Practice. I chose *diligence* simply because I like saying the word.

What I *can* do, which is probably more useful to you anyway, is to mix and match what I have learned in my recent study into what I think is a pretty accurate explanation of a *process*, even if my linguistic precision is a little off. The process is a good one to understand.

This is the process: Energy arises within us. We use that energy to do stuff. That using of energy is *effort*. Appropriate effort, which is effort that is balanced, sustained, and committed, is *diligence*. And diligence results in bringing about "wholesomeness, overcoming craving, reviving morale and seeing to the well being of others," to name just a few benefits. In short, diligence results in progress toward freedom. It is my proposition that the Most Excellent Practice of Energy (which is the most literal translation) is in fact the practice of this process. It must begin with energy, but leads naturally toward diligence and ultimately to freedom.

Let's see if we can unpack this. Once we understand the process, we'll be able to explore how we relate to it and how to use it.

Energy in this context is pretty much what the guys at MIT think it is. It is the fuel that enables you to do work. It refers to both mental energy, enabling you to meditate or study or take in a talk like this one, and to physical energy, with which you engage in other activities in life and on your spiritual path, such as walking meditation, being of service casually or formally, getting out of bed, and so on. Energy is what fuels you on your path.

So you have some energy and you use it to do some work. That's *effort*. Unfortunately, this is how many people see their meditation practice: as work. It's something you need to make an effort to maintain. And of course, you do. But effort need not be an unpleasant task. You can expend effort on useful activities, or spend it on unhelpful things. You can use too much of it in the right place, or not enough, and either of those options are not a lot better than wasting effort in the wrong place. Effort becomes unpleasant when it is not expended in accordance with your needs and resources at a particular time. If you can learn to use your energy effectively and appropriately, then effort becomes a joy. It is fruitful and satisfying and even more fun than being a sloth in bed, which is one of my favorite activities (perhaps second only to hitting that groove when you are making an appropriate effort in the appropriate place.) But, as with everything else in this life, what counts as appropriate effort changes. We'll talk about how to deal with that later.

Once you are able to determine how much and to what to apply effort, you then need to sustain it; not necessarily sustain a particular application of effort, but sustain the state of applying appropriate effort at any particular moment. That's the first part of diligence. This means constant reassessment of the effort you are putting out (don't worry, it becomes mostly second nature with time). You might worry that this implies constantly striving, but don't forget that you are constantly making *appropriate* effort. Sustained effort does not mean unrelenting hard work; in fact, that would be contrary to diligence. There will be times when it is appropriate to expend no effort at all. Sustained effort means constantly being mindful of where and how you are expending your energy, and adapting to every situation appropriately.

Diligence also requires commitment to your practice. That might sound obvious, but unless you make a clear and determined commitment to yourself that you intend to follow your path and the practices associated with it, you will find motivation difficult and your practice will become a constant

struggle. (It may be a constant struggle at times anyway; don't make it worse by committing to it only half-heartedly.)

I experienced both sides of this process in the first year or so of my own meditation practice: When I first started meditating at a 10 day retreat. The experience for me was such that I found I had a lot more energy than I typically had had before. I applied this energy to my new practice by putting a lot of effort into formal sitting, which was very satisfying for me. I was committed (I made a public commitment about eight months after my first retreat), I was determined, and the effort was sustained over a long period of time. The results were dramatic and positive. But after a while my energy started to wane, returning to what is normal for me (which is generally pretty low). It became difficult to maintain the same level of effort, and as a result I began to feel disappointment with myself, then judgement, then doubt. With the doubt, the commitment wavered, but I still was determined, so I kept trying to apply a lot of effort to formal sitting. My meditation sessions became less satisfying, my personal view of myself swung toward the negative, and my energy dropped even more due to the emotional conflict that was arising. The visible results of my practice became difficult to see, ostensibly negligible. About a year after I started meditating, I began to wonder if this was really the right thing for me to be doing. Fortunately, I phoned my teacher Shinzen and he gave me an encouraging talking to. The one thing I remember him saying was that it was OK to meditate less than I used to. Everything changes, including our needs and resources.

Now, ten years later, it is much more clear to me what was going on. I started off with high energy, appropriate effort for the situation, and the other factors that define diligence, and I could see clear progress along the path. As my energy level changed, I did not adapt my effort to match, and in a cascading tumble of consequences from that one thing, my entire practice came close to collapsing.

On Thursday I will talk more about how to assess your energy and decide where to place your effort. Today I want to focus on some practical strategies for adapting and maintaining your energy.

There is a lot of information out there about how to increase physical energy. Vegetable juice, herbs, fewer carbs, better sleep, exercise, B vitamins, caffeine, sunlight, hot baths, loud music, anti-depressants. Physical energy is deeply mixed up with what we put into our bodies, what we keep out of our bodies, and what we do with our bodies. There are also physiological disorders that affect your energy. So of course the first thing to look at is how you are treating your body, and what your body

needs. I'm sure this is not news to any of you. However, it is helpful to understand that there is a general baseline level of energy for everyone (which is different for everyone) and trying to artificially create a permanently higher level than is natural to you will be self-defeating, and potentially dangerous. It's fine to artificially boost your energy for short periods of time. For example, I drink energy drinks when I drive to California. They really do keep me alert. But I wouldn't drink them every day as a regular part of my diet, for the purpose of having consistently more energy than a naturally do. On the other hand, my body may chronically lack certain vitamins. Taking those regularly to bring my body to its natural state of health would be a responsible thing to do.

So before anything else, you might consider reviewing your physical health and care of your body. Eat a good diet, see a health practitioner if you think you might have a fixable physical issue. I doubt there's anyone here who doesn't monitor these things constantly, but it is still worth repeating that your mindfulness practice will be directly affected by your physiological state, so you need to take care of yourself physically. And of course, the same goes for mental fitness. Depression, anxiety, even run-of-the-mill daily stress can cause significant drops in energy. So check yourself out.

Assuming that you are as healthy as you can be and taking good care of yourself, you can then look at some ways of increasing your energy specifically in relation to your practice.

Perhaps the most common manifestation of non-health related low energy in this context is sleepiness during formal meditation. Does anyone else have this experience, that you feel wide awake until you sit on your cushion and close your eyes, at which time you suddenly desperately need to sleep? The zen folks address this issue directly in their traditional activities: they do a formalized fast-walking meditation in between sitting meditation, and what with the physical movement and the changes in environmental stimuli as you move from the zendo to the walking courtyard and back, your body certainly perks up, even if your mind doesn't. Sit for 25 minutes. Do fast-walking for 25 minutes. Sit for 25 minutes... Additionally, in the meditation hall, there is a monk whose job it is to watch for people who are falling asleep and hit them with a stick. Now, to be fair, this is a formalized and skilled "hitting," in which the practitioner acknowledges and acquiesces to the stick, and the monk doing the hitting is able to strike a very specific muscle group in a very skilled way which releases muscular tension and stimulates mental alertness. It actually feels really good, physically, although the mental agony of having been caught sleeping might not be pleasant.

Taking the example of zen monks, we can see that the use of tricks and tools to maintain physical energy is not only allowed, but encouraged. It's not cheating to stand up in place if you feel dozy during a sit, or to walk briskly around the block instead of moving slowly during the walking period. Opening your eyes, even looking into a light will stimulate your brain for a while. And as much as western meditation has a reputation for being vegetarian and substance-free, I heartily advocate coffee before an evening meditation session!

There are also things you can do on a more subtle level. When I sit to meditate, I first assess my energy level. I do this so habitually now that I don't really think about it, but by the time I am taking my first breath, I have figured out if I am likely to snooze or be mentally dull, or if I am mentally agitated, physically hyperactive, etc. I then choose a meditation technique or strategy to suit that energy level. For example, during my morning sit, I am often still sleepy, and the caffeine hasn't kicked in yet, so I will choose a technique that requires more mental activity. For me, this usually means a noting practice, where I have to pay enough attention to each sensation I feel that I am able to label it accurately. If you have done Goenka style body scanning, you could try that. I am told that it can be quite mentally active. I will usually start with my eyes open when I am dozy, and as I become more alert, I will close my eyes, and sometimes will shift to a different technique. In the same vein, I would not choose to do a relaxation technique or an open-focus style, which tends to calm the mind, if my mind is already so calm that it wants to sleep. If I am not sitting with a group, and am very sleepy, I might do a walking meditation instead of sitting. At times like these, is it also important to have equanimity with your unfocused mind. It's hard enough to keep your body conscious, don't get upset if your brain isn't fully awake, as well.

At other times, I might begin a sit and notice that I feel very alert. Then I'd start in with one of the more tranquil practices. Breath meditation, just sitting, or an even-coverage awareness might be interesting at that time. Or, I might want to apply that energy to a noting practice, to investigate some area of interest to me. If my mind is over active, I will spend a few minutes quieting it, perhaps with some physical body focus. Sometimes, noting mental images and mental sounds, that is, looking directly at the active thinking, can cool it down.

Remember, though, the you mustn't be attached to the success of these tricks. If you do everything you can and still doze off, then that's just what happened. When you wake up, notice it, and carry on. Don't consider yourself a failure if you are unable to create sufficient energy to sustain alert

concentration, or if your mind just won't stop racing despite your efforts to calm it. This is great opportunity to develop your equanimity. Either way you are still strengthening your meditation skills: concentration and clarity if you are alert, or equanimity if you are dull or sleepy. It's a success either way.

Some traditional texts tell us that "investigation into experience" will *create* energy. "Investigation into experience" refers to the type of observational meditation we do here. Watching the moment and gaining insight into how things really are can result in an increase in energy. This is what I experienced when I began meditating: after 10 days of investigative noting practice, I discovered that I was able to stay alert for 90 minutes every morning, and I even needed less sleep! This is not uncommon. Many people report that after meditating regularly for a while their need for sleep decreases. However, my experience was that after a while, my body returned to its normal functioning. It sounds like a Catch-22 to say that the way to create enough energy to meditate is to meditate, but it makes sense if you look at the bigger picture. You may not find that you suddenly wake up during a sleepy sit, but you will find that over time, if you attempt to meditate regularly (even if much of that is dozy or scattered), you will find more mental and emotional energy available to direct toward your meditation. (It is also true that sometimes a single meditation period will in fact energize you physically and you will end more alert than you began.)

And of course, individual experiences will come and go and will be different for different people and different situations. These are skills we need to practice and develop, and over time you become more adept at managing and modifying your energy in appropriate ways.

On Thursday, I will be talking about how to decide what is appropriate use of your energy. Until then, I invite you to explore some of these tricks for stimulating or calming your energy during your meditation periods.