

## **5a. Diligence, Part 2**

June 8, 2017

I've been having trouble organizing this evening's talk. It doesn't matter where I start from, it always ends up sounding like something you'd pick up in the Healthy Living aisle at Barnes and Noble. Not that I have anything against Healthy Living books. On the contrary. I just don't think I'm the one to be lecturing you on eating well and time management.

At the retreat last Saturday we talked about the energy–effort–diligence process, and I said that *energy* in the context of a spiritual practice is the same stuff we use in the context of our daily lives. It's the fuel that enables you to do stuff like get out of bed, sit through a meeting at work, play a softball game in the evening, and cook a meal when you get home. That same stuff is what enables you to sit in formal meditation, to read a book about compassion, to actively try to be mindful during the day, or to come out to a talk about meditation on a Thursday night. There is not some separate kind of energy that is needed for mindfulness.

That's not really surprising, since there is not actually any difference between our daily lives and our mindfulness practice. As I said on Saturday, the first step in the process of the Most Excellent Practice of energy–effort–diligence is assessing, adapting, and maintaining a healthy physical and mental lifestyle.

I use the word effort to mean the act of using energy to do something: applying it to actual activity. A lot of the skills of determining where and when and how much effort to apply to any mental or physical activity are the same skills you will also learn about in the Healthy Living aisle. Time management, setting priorities, learning to say “no,” and so on are going to have a distinct and direct impact on your journey along your path. I encourage you to consider if there are areas in your life where you would benefit from refining those sorts of skills. Then read a book about it or go to a therapist or whatever you need to do to hone those skills. They will be invaluable in your practice and your life.

Tonight I'd like to share some thoughts about diligence. Actually, I'm mostly going to remind you of things you already know, but which are often not given the attention they deserve.

The first reminder is this: everyone has their own “normal” baseline energy level. Assuming you are treating your body in a way that maximizes your energy potential, your personal natural energy level is what is normal for you. Of course it will wax and wane, and you can effect it in the short term, but you will always eventually return to your equilibrium. Consequently, comparing yourself to other people and wishing your baseline was different is only going to lead to frustration. My normal energy level is pretty low compared to many of my friends, and I have to plan around that. If I continually try to expend the same amount of energy they do, I’m going to exhaust myself physically or burn out emotionally.

It’s like having different sized gas tanks. When I lived in England, I had a private pilot’s license and a share in a sweet little four-seater airplane. It was equipped with special long-range tanks which held more fuel than your normal private recreational aircraft. Once I was planning a trip with some of friends. We were going to fly from Stratford (where the plane was based) to Dublin. Four of them were taking the group plane, the one with the long-range tanks, and the rest of us were going to rent a plane which I would pilot. The aircraft we were going to rent had standard tanks. This meant that while the first group would be able to fly all the way to Dublin without stopping, I would have to stop in Aberystwyth to top up the fuel tanks. Which meant of course that they’d be in a pub drinking Guinness before my group had even made landfall.

Now here’s the thing. It doesn’t matter how much I wanted to be able to go further on that small tank of gas, or how much I willed it to have more fuel. If I didn’t stop to refuel, I was going to run out of power somewhere over the Irish Sea.

Don’t do that to yourself. Too many people in our society fail to recognize their limits. Get to know your energy reserves and how far you can go on them. Plan for refueling stops (I nap every afternoon, and have learned to avoid scheduling important things at that time). Or if you happen to have huge tanks, then don’t expect everyone else to keep up with you.

When it comes to deciding on specific places to commit your effort, (be it what committees to join at your sangha or church, or what time to go to bed) keep a few questions in mind as you weigh your options. First of all, will this activity be beneficial to you or others? Or will it cause harm (to others or you!). No one here would consciously do something that they know would hurt someone else,

but have any of you ever decided to do things that you knew you didn't have the energy for, because perhaps of feeling like you *ought to*? Or maybe you went to a movie that you knew would be so violent or emotional that it would cause you distress, but your friend really wants to see it and you don't want to disappoint them? Well, who is being hurt in these cases? We have a responsibility to not cause harm to ourselves, also.

Along these lines, another good question to ask is, "where does my passion lie?" If you have a number of good options but you are particularly drawn to one, then that's a pretty good indication of what to do. (All other things being equal of course). Somehow many of us have learned that it is more noble to do things we don't want to do, or it is selfish to spend a lot of time on something we enjoy or that seems easy for us. What nonsense this is! We are denying our enthusiasm and motivation and expertise to others because we feel it is selfish? No, if we feel drawn to some particular cause or craft or to growing yourself at a retreat or by taking a class, we will be more effective and more satisfied than if we are doing something we have no enthusiasm for. You serve others by serving yourself. Pleasure is not a bad thing in itself. Pleasure is a motivator and satisfier. (Just don't get too attached!)

The final thing I'd like to remind you about is what *diligence* is really about. Diligence is often defined in part by "sustained effort." I take this to mean *sustainable* effort. This is not about unrelenting grit-your-teeth, white-knuckled nonstop effort. It's about being sure that you can sustain whatever effort you have decided to apply. And this, like just about everything else, requires mindfulness of the present moment. Learn to listen to your body, to monitor your energy levels, and to adapt to your changing needs and resources. Notice how you are responding emotionally. There will certainly be times when you are not enjoying a task that you have decided is appropriate to do, but watch out for that subtle nagging feeling that something isn't quite *right* about it. On the whole, though, appropriate effort will be fulfilling, even when it is not pleasant, and often will be simply a joy to do. Look out for those responses, too, by the way. When you notice that you feel good about what you are doing, take a moment to enjoy that feeling, and notice what it is that is so satisfying about it so that you can bring that to bear on future decisions. This ensures sustainability and motivation; or, in word, diligence.

In short, the energy–effort–diligence practice is about knowing how big your fuel tank is, and planning in such a way that you always have enough; planning trips that have beneficial outcomes, to both yourself and others; and flying to places that you want to go. And all the while, flying well,

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monitoring your dials and gauges, keeping an eye on the chart, and making whatever changes to the flight plan are necessary to maintain safety and satisfaction.

## **Diligence Exercises**

Choose one or a couple of exercises. Don't try to do them all!

1. Try to monitor your energy level throughout the day, both physical and mental. See if you can start building a habit of noticing when your energy levels change.
2. Look at how you take care of your body.
  - As you go through your day, notice your habits or behaviors that are conducive to good mental or physical health, and which support your natural energy levels. Congratulate yourself for the ways you take care of your body.
  - At the same time, or on another day, notice habits and behaviors that are not conducive to good health, or which limit your energy. Don't get down on yourself for them, just notice.
  - If it is appropriate for you, choose one (small) thing that you can do, or stop doing, or change to better support your health and energy. Make a plan and commit to a first step.
3. Look at where you use your energy.
  - As you go through your day, pay attention to activities that might be harmful in some way to yourself, such as places in which you feel overcommitted, or activities that leave you feeling emotionally or physically "off."
  - Also notice times when you feel good about what you are doing. Notice what it is about these activities that seem wholesome or beneficial.
  - Think about whether there are things you wish you were doing, or feel drawn to do, but aren't doing. Why are you not doing them? There may be good reasons for not doing them; this exercise is about being honest with yourself about the reasons so that your decision is not driven by inappropriate emotional snags.
  - If it seems appropriate to you, make a plan to use your energy more diligently. Do less of something that is not a good use of your energy, or more of something that is. Perhaps you want to start something new. This could be anything from taking a class or getting politically active, to modifying your daily schedule for better sleep, etc.