

Seven Factors of Awakening: Effort

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The third factor of awakening is the factor of effort. It might be appropriate to translate the Pali word for the effort factor of awakening, which is *virīya*, as “*heroic effort*.”

I've had a complicated relationship with the idea of effort in practice. In my early years, I put a lot of effort into practice, but I didn't see it as effort. For me, “effort” was kind of a bad word. It meant work, with the idea of working at meditation, which was not such a welcome thing. I associated effort with striving, pushing, or doing something more – adding something to the experience.

But slowly over time, I've learned to recognize that I actually put a lot of effort into practice. The effort that really works, the magic effort that arises – the alchemy that really helps meditation unfold – is not a self-centered effort. It is not the effort of striving or pushing or contracting. It's not an effort that is exhausting. I've done plenty of that. But rather, it's an effort that the psychophysical system almost wants to do. It is almost like a natural flow of aliveness. As meditation practice develops, there is more and more of a sense that there's a current of effort, a current of energy or engagement that is what the system wants, and how the system is.

This is not much different than when a little toddler is completely involved in putting effort into playing a game, playing with blocks, or building a sandcastle. There's an effort there, but it is not work per se. It's more like the effort of play. There can be a lot of energy in play, but it doesn't feel like it's an effort to play. The phrase “heroic engagement” means what we do is important. We give ourselves to it.

To understand each of these factors awakening it is helpful to see how they each continue and build on the previous one. The first factor of awakening – *sati* (awareness or mindfulness) – is about developing and establishing ourselves in our present moment experience so we can experience it, feel it, and be alive to it in a more vivid way. This is not because we're working at it, but because the senses and our attentional apparatus are really available to receive, feel, experience, and perceive what's happening.

Opening to attention this way is kind of a restful place to be. As the attention becomes more acute, or sharp, there is greater clarity of awareness of what is happening in the present moment. Again, this is not because we're working at it. It is as if we've cleaned the glasses that we're wearing or the windshield of our car. Or the smog has cleared, and we can see the mountains and the details in the distance with some clarity. Now we can see much more clearly.

So we start seeing the distinctions of things. Things are not a blur. We see things clearly. As we begin seeing things clearly, we start seeing the distinction between what is skillful and not skillful, what is helpful and not helpful.

There are two areas of that distinction – what is helpful for where the attention goes, and what is helpful in terms of *how* to be when we're attentive.

For example, if I'm sitting meditating and I'm trying to stay with my breathing but my mind is just chattering away at 60 miles a minute, at some point, I might realize where attention needs to be. I see that it is wise and helpful to bring attention to this high-energy agitated mind and hold it in awareness, hold it in the open palm of awareness. I don't try to fix it, I don't have a problem with it, I don't try to push it away, and I don't get upset with

it. I can just be with it. I find that giving that kind of attention is like being with an upset child. When there is a calm adult there, the child begins to relax. It is the same way with the mind if we can learn to bring attention to it.

Two things happened in that example. One is that I decided it was helpful and skillful to bring attention to the busy mind. It was also helpful that how I paid attention to it was important – that I paid attention in a non-judgmental, non-critical, non-striving, non-probing, not working or pushing or fixing way. I was just open to it, but open in such a way that I wasn't involved in it or entangled with it. It was a spacious, open awareness, where the mind was open to see and allow the busyness. When we do this something begins to thaw, relax, or settle.

With time, we start seeing these distinctions between what's helpful and what is not helpful. And we see where it is useful to place the attention, and how to put the attention there. Right effort is the choices we make around those two things. That is the right courageous effort. We do make some effort in this practice, meaning we do make some choices about how we are and what we do. In meditation practice, a lot of that has to do with the choice about what we do with our attention. So we pay attention to what is skillful, what's helpful.

Sometimes that means that with the breathing, for example, or sensations of the body, or whatever we're paying attention to in the present, it might be skillful to pay attention to what is pleasant. If there is a strong tendency toward paying attention to problems and what's unpleasant, and the difficulties tend to take over, sometimes it's wise to choose specifically what is pleasant and enjoyable in practice.

If all things are equal, sometimes it's useful to orient yourself more to what's pleasant. Find out what's pleasant and enjoyable about the breathing. Maybe there is a certain part of the cycle of breathing in and out that's more enjoyable. Or there is a certain place in the body where it feels a little bit nicer to breathe. It feels good to be connected there. So we take in the nourishment – we take in what's pleasant so it is easier for the mind to want to be there. If the mind only pays attention to what's unpleasant, why would the mind want to be in the present moment?

Certainly, it's sometimes appropriate to pay attention to what's unpleasant. I've sometimes had physical pain in meditation, and I found it very useful, important, and skillful to bring careful attention to the pain. Sometimes I do this so I know how to adjust my posture, to fix the alignment. Sometimes I pay attention to the pain so that I don't make it worse by contracting, pushing, or getting caught up in aversion or self-pity. Sometimes just feeling the pain really opens something up and allows it to release and relax.

Right effort, the effort factor of awakening, has to do with making a very relaxed choice about where we put our attention. What can we do that's skillful and helpful? Awareness is one of the great resources we have. I think of awareness (or attention) as a little bit like food. Wherever our attention goes feeds what we pay attention to. So if we put a lot of attention into what's unskillful and unhelpful, paradoxically, we actually feed what is unskillful, and that develops more.

For instance, if we spend a lot of time with resentment, hate, self-pity, or conceit, and we really pay attention to it, telling ourselves stories about it and reviewing it, that means the food of attention goes there and feeds it. Doing that tends to create the conditions for what's unhealthy in us to keep growing and developing greater momentum within our life. But if the food of attention goes to our goodwill, our compassion, our care, our generosity, and kindness, or if it simply goes to a clear open attention to what's here, then our attention feeds what's skillful.

What's great about this is that if we attend to and are careful with *how* we pay attention, then we can feed what's skillful, healthy, and wholesome, when we need to pay attention to what's unskillful. If we have a lot of hostility or resentment, sometimes it's useful to take a good, honest look at that. But while we do that we are not feeding the resentment, because the effort we're making is to be with the resentment by holding it in the open palm of awareness. We make the effort to just see it and allow it to be there, but we don't fight it, we don't give in to it, and we don't act on it. We just notice it, make room for it, and see what happens when we just allow it to be there without feeding it.

The word for effort, the effort factor of awakening, is “this.” It means we make a little bit of a choice. *This* is where attention goes. Or *this* is how to pay attention. Because we have enough clarity, we can recognize where it's useful to pay attention: to *this*, or how to pay attention: with *this* kind of attention.

So this choice is a little bit like a recognition: *this* is how to do it. As the mind becomes more present, more here, we see more clearly what's here. It isn't so much that we choose in the abstract – “Oh, it's a good idea to be this way.”

It's more that we recognize, “Oh, here it is. This is the corner. This is the way to be. Here it is. This is where I need to be engaged. This is what I feed. This is what I allow.”

The words for the factors of awakening are: for mindfulness – “here.” “What” is for the factor of awakening of investigation, or the differentiation of dharmas. “This” is for the factor of awakening of effort. May your ability to recognize this is the right place for your effort to be give birth to a heroic effort. What you do is important. You are important. Let your effort flow into caring for yourself in the world. Thank you.