Deepening Practice (4/5): Our Part in Practice

Dharma talk by Diana Clark

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Welcome, welcome again. Here we are on our fourth day, a Thursday, where we're exploring this story of Meghiya. This sutta that we find in the Anguttara Nikaya 9.3[2] has five supports that help practice deepen.

Meghiya was a monk, and he was serving as the Buddha's attendant. This is before Ānanda[3] was the Buddha's attendant. One day, Meghiya saw a beautiful mango grove and thought, "Oh, this is a great place to practice." So, he asked the Buddha for permission to go, and eventually, the Buddha agreed.

Meghiya goes to this mango grove and sits down to meditate, but it didn't unfold as he expected. Instead of this peaceful meditation that he had imagined, his mind was harassed by sensual desire, ill will, and cruelty—three types of thoughts. I love this word *harassed*. [Laughter] You know, sometimes we can feel like that. Surprised by what had happened, Meghiya returns to the Buddha and tells him about his experience.

The Buddha responds by pointing to conditions that can support practice. The Buddha doesn't tell Meghiya, "Oh, you're doing everything wrong." Instead, the Buddha says that there are conditions that support the maturation of liberation, this movement towards more and more freedom.

So far this week, we've explored the first three supports, or the first three conditions:

1. Spiritual friendship.
2. Ethical living, living life with care.
3. Beneficial conversations, conversations that can open the heart and point towards liberation.

Today we come to the fourth support: the effort, the energy we bring to cultivating the mind.

Something that is really striking for me in this whole story of Meghiya and the Buddha—and Meghiya trying to find his way with his practice—is that Meghiya had an extraordinary teacher. We might even say it's one of the best teachers that humankind has had. Meghiya had the Buddha as a teacher. Meghiya was an attendant. He was living with the Buddha. He could speak directly with the Buddha about his practice, and still, his meditation was difficult.

Being close to wisdom didn't automatically transform his mind. Receiving good teachings didn't automatically remove his old tendencies. Even the Buddha himself couldn't simply make Meghiya's mind free.

I just recently taught a month-long retreat, and I remember in practice discussions there was more than one practitioner that would say something like, "I've been practicing for so long, but I realized that I've been secretly wishing that by just coming on a long retreat, the teacher would somehow like, zap me [Laughter], in a way that would help bring more freedom." We feel like, "Okay, if I just show up for a month, then the teacher will see my sincerity and will just bestow upon me some freedom." It's never articulated in the mind that way, but there can be this way that we might think just applying ourselves for a certain duration is sufficient.

But the Buddha is pointing to something a little bit different. Not only do we need the conditions—like being on a retreat for a month or being the Buddha's attendant—but we have to participate in a particular way. It's not only conditions, it's also participation.

There's a part of us that knows this too. When the Buddha is talking to Meghiya, he uses this type of language. He talks about one who has *aroused energy*. Aroused energy, brought up some energy, applied some energy, allowed some energy to be there in a particular way. It's energy for abandoning what's not helpful, and energy for cultivating what is helpful.

Then the Buddha goes one step further. He emphasizes some continuity. He uses this word of *strength* or *firmness*. It's not giving up this cultivation of what is helpful. There's an emphasis on persistence, and this is such a part of the art of practice: how can we be persistent in our participation without too much effort, without too much striving?

For us in the West, this can be something that we really have to cultivate and discover for ourselves. We are often accustomed to really applying a lot of effort and pushing. So we need participation with persistence, but without pushing. Applying energy isn't just simply trying harder. It isn't how much force we're applying. More force isn't necessarily better effort.

It's not about winning a struggle with ourselves as much as it is about where we are putting whatever energy is available. Different people have different amounts. At different times in our lives, we have different amounts. Sometimes we're ill and we don't have a lot of energy. Sometimes we have some chronic issues and we just don't have a lot of energy. That's okay. What's more important is what we are putting our energy toward, and can there be some persistence, some continuity?

As I mentioned, the Buddha was pointing in two different directions: abandoning what's unhelpful, unskillful, and unwholesome—*akusala*[4] in Pali—and not continuing to feed what leads towards greater suffering. Learning when to put something down.

When we're meditating, we learn that when the mind is lost in thought and we wake up from that, we don't just go back to thinking again. As best we can, we come back to the present moment, to what's being experienced now. We are abandoning the unhelpful and cultivating the helpful. It is the recognition of what supports clarity, learning, understanding, and greater freedom, and giving those qualities and experiences our attention, our energy, and our effort.

We don't control what arises. Ill will, kindness, confusion—these things arise. This idea of energy and effort becomes a question of what to feed or what not to feed, because what we repeatedly pay attention to gets strengthened. We know this.

The Buddha encouraging our participation is more about steadiness rather than intensity. It's not so much a heroic striving as just beginning again, returning, and continuing to cultivate as best we can. It's the recognition that cultivation takes time. Not every meditation is going to feel fruitful. Not every wholesome intention will be strong, but we keep participating anyway.

When difficulty arises—as it will—it doesn't mean the practice isn't working, and it doesn't mean that we're not making "progress." It doesn't mean anything. It just means it's a difficult experience. We don't have to make it mean so much more about what it means about me as a meditator or what it means about meditation in general.

We can see this in Meghiya's experience. The difficult meditation that he was having revealed what was active in his mind. Seeing greed, aversion, and confusion—some of these really deep roots that all humans have, unless they're completely free. Seeing these isn't a failure. It just shows us where there is something to understand. It shows us where there can be areas of cultivation.

So much of practice is just this ordinary effort. This ordinary movement towards sitting down to meditate, offering generosity, turning towards kindness, being open to learning about ourselves, and being open to understanding ourselves. Sometimes it means just not continuing something that's unhelpful. Pausing before reacting. Not sending that message quite yet when we notice we have a little activation in the mind and the heart.

Sometimes this effort and energy simply means remembering. Remembering our intentions, remembering what matters, and returning after we've been lost, distracted, or forgetting what's important and the direction we would like to go. Effort might look like letting go, pausing, turning towards understanding. Just this ongoing willingness to participate in cultivation.

The Buddha offered tremendous support for Meghiya. He taught Meghiya. He pointed out conditions. He helped Meghiya understand some things that he could put into place. He showed him directly: here's a direction to go towards liberation. But Meghiya still had to learn what strengthened the unwholesome, what supported the wholesome, and how to keep practicing. Meghiya had to do this himself.

The Buddha was pointing the way, but Meghiya had to apply some effort and participate. Of course, the same is true for us. We need teachers, we need friends, we need teachings, we need supportive conditions. And our own participation is one of those conditions.

Applying effort is one support among five. It exists within a network of supporting conditions. It isn't just about powering through or applying more and more force. Instead, we are supported by practice, we participate in that practice, and we recognize what is worth strengthening, what is worth cultivating, and what is worth putting down and letting go.

Practice deepens through steady participation: learning what leads towards suffering, learning what leads towards freedom, and then continuing to practice the best we can. It's not asking for something that we can't give. It's asking us to meet this moment, to meet this practice, with whatever is available for us today, in this moment.

Thank you. Thank you for your participation, and I look forward to seeing you tomorrow when we learn about the fifth support that the Buddha offered to Meghiya. Thank you.

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1. **Meghiya Sutta:** A discourse in the Pali Canon (found in Udāna 4.1 and Anguttara Nikaya 9.3) where the Buddha outlines five things that bring the heart's release to maturity. ↩
2. **Anguttara Nikaya 9.3:** The "Numbered" or "Numerical" Discourses of the Buddha.
3. **Ānanda:** One of the principal disciples and a devout attendant of the Buddha. ↩
4. **Akusala:** A Pali word meaning unwholesome, unskillful, or wrong.

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