

What is “Right Effort” in Meditation?

‘Effort’ is the fuel in our lives, the underlying energy that gives us the strength we need to move constantly forward into all of the challenges we face every day. Effort is like the legs we need in order to walk along the path of our life in an intentional and meaningful way.

Unfortunately, we often feel oppressed by what we’re required to do from day-to-day and from moment-to-moment. Our ‘daily grind’ can have a sense of imposed duty, and it can sometimes be hard to get out of bed to start another day of stress and general overwhelm. We may put out enough effort to accomplish what we need to do to get by, but there isn’t always a feeling of full engagement. We try to do the things we feel we *should* do, but ‘our heart isn’t in it.’ We can even feel resentment, as if someone else is making us do something we don’t want to do. It’s like when our parents made us do chores when we wanted to be outside playing—except now we’re grownups, and there really isn’t anyone to blame any more.

We can even feel this way about our meditation practice. Letting go of our urge for constant entertainment isn’t easy, and there are various tricks we may use to avoid the unfamiliar boredom of simply sitting with ourselves. One version is to make more of the practice that it actually is, subtly congratulating ourselves on our ‘spiritual’ realizations and trying to recreate self-confirming experiences in meditation, rather than simply letting them go and returning to our breath. Another reaction to boredom is to be very dutiful and serious, which ultimately results in many judgmental thoughts about how we’re doing. And, of course, we can avoid this unfamiliar open space altogether by just convincing ourselves that meditation is a waste of time and continuing to hang out in our reactive, familiar nest.

‘Right Effort’ is the opposite of this feeling of disconnect and drudgery. It’s the natural energy we have when we are fully present and engaged in a situation. It arises from the natural tendency of our mind to open suddenly in any situation, as if awakening from a trance. When we are fully engaged, heart and mind, with someone or something, this openness is prolonged and exhilarating.

An analogy that’s sometimes used for this natural attention is the feeling of falling in love, where no artificial effort is required to manufacture the feeling, or atmosphere, of the ‘other.’ Our heart and mind are completely full of the experience of that person, and it naturally comes to us again and again, with wordless wonder, presence, and appreciation. Everything feels more alive and vivid, like being in the technicolor Land of Oz after our usual black and white world.

We can also feel this full, effortless-effort when we are engaged in challenging activities

like sports, music, or other arts. The interesting thing to think about is that this occurs more when we have studied and trained in something, again and again, until there are moments when it seems to happen ‘effortlessly.’ A high-level hockey player, or a singer performing Handel’s Messiah, have to be familiar to a level where they can perform their part with a simultaneous awareness of everything else going on around them, and thereby ‘lose themselves’ in the energy of the overall experience. Skilled surfers feel a complete oneness with the wave that they catch and ride. Time becomes irrelevant in the pure joy and fullness of these experiences, and there is no separation between the experience and the experiencer.

These are all analogies for how we can live our lives fully, with genuine presence and engagement. The way we train for this is with mindfulness meditation.

The psychologist and author Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi described this famously as “Flow”: *The best moments in our lives are not the passive, receptive, relaxing times... The best moments usually occur if a person’s body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile.*

Csikszentmihalyi describes this as a feeling of effortlessness, where one’s actions and awareness are merged so fully that any sense of self-consciousness disappears and there is a complete absorption in the activity. He distinguishes between Intrinsic and Extrinsic motivation for our conscious actions, the highest being Intrinsic motivation, where we do something because we love it. ‘Extrinsic motivation’ is what I described above, ranging from ‘fear motivation’ (like working just to make more money, or studying only to get through a course but without inspiration to learn), to a more useful purpose of wanting to get better at something, learn more skills, etc.

‘Intrinsic motivation,’ on the other hand, comes from the inside and moves us forward with no second-guessing—just natural and complete confidence and a feeling of egoless power. A traditional Buddhist image for this kind of effort is the walk of an elephant, who, through its knowledge and mastery of the environment and its confidence in its own strength and ability, easily and precisely places each foot and moves powerfully along at its own pace.

Csikszentmihalyi’s distinction between ‘extrinsic’ and ‘intrinsic’ motivations is applicable to our mindfulness practice, where we are training ourselves to have the ability to be fully engaged in our life. We can say that our ‘intrinsic’ motivation is our own wisdom, the intuition about how we go in and out of being present with what is happening with our life. The ‘flow’ we experience during those moments when we are suddenly present feels like the sun bursting through the clouds, with warmth, clarity, and the joy of being alive.

We identify this feeling in retrospect, after the moment passes and we begin to evaluate it. When we are in this flow, we’re not really thinking about it at all. So this is why our

mindfulness training is so vital: we are directly, deliberately letting our thoughts go and coming back to the simple, present situation of our body breathing. By doing this over and over, we strengthen our familiarity with the contrast between being caught up in the clutter of our discursive mind and being simply present and engaged.

So this familiarity with our mental pattern is the on-going fuel for our 'extrinsic' motivation, the discipline we undertake to develop our natural ability which is too often covered over. This wisdom keeps us going through daily practice sessions which, from the point of view of our conditioned mind, can be boring and tedious. Sometimes we try to talk ourselves out of them, convincing ourselves that we have more important things to do. It can be a major effort just to turn off our phones for a little while, or stop spinning around and get ourselves to sit down on our meditation cushion. We live in such a speedy, stressful world, that we can easily live out our whole life without stopping for the kind of reflection that enables us to truly *live*.

And, as with Csikszentmihalyi's description of 'Flow,' the more trained and familiar we are in mindfulness, the more natural it will become for us to be fully engaged in the vividness of our life. With this effortlessly clear and bright presence, we can more easily see what in the world we can do that is truly helpful, beyond our own reactive ideas, prejudices, hopes, and fears. This is the basis of true compassion.

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This article is a revised excerpt from Patricia's upcoming book, Eight Steps to an Authentic Life. This friendly, readable book explains the Buddhist Eightfold Path, with teachings and practices for integrating all aspects of the path into a life of wakefulness and meaning. Look for it soon on Amazon.

Patricia Ullman is a senior teacher and meditation instructor in the Tibetan Buddhist and Shambhala traditions, having studied and practiced for over forty years under the guidance of some of the most renowned teachers of our day. She has led workshops and retreats throughout Europe and North America for children, professionals, students and adults, from beginners to advanced practitioners of meditation and mindfulness in everyday life. Patricia holds a J.D. degree and has spent her professional life in law, mediation, restorative justice, and non-profit leadership. She brings mindfulness techniques into these fields as part of the natural process of transforming organizational culture and working with conflict. A fourth generation Washingtonian, Patricia currently lives in the DC area and works with private clients and businesses—including law firms, hospitals, assisted living facilities, and other organizations—who wish to gain tools for improving the quality of their lives, work, and relationships with others.

Visit Patricia's website at peaceofminds.org.

