

Is It Worth It?

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Over in Thailand, old people, sick people, and dead people are a common sight. Over here you have to go to special places to see them: hospitals, old people's homes. As for dead people, they hardly let you go at all. All you see are the ones that are made up. So we live in this bizarre sanitized world where all we're going to see are good-looking people. Someone once made a comment, when seeing some really obese people in Arizona, that here in California they wouldn't be allowed on the beach, that it would be an affront to other people if someone with an unattractive body showed it in public. So we get some very bizarre ideas about what life is like.

So it's good to reflect on a regular basis, to remember what spurred Prince Siddhartha to leave his family to go out into the wilderness: the sight of an old person, a sick person, and a dead person, and then reflecting on the fact that the same fate was lying in wait for him. And what was true for him is true for us.

I had a student one time who, when meditating one night, started remembering previous lifetimes. Whether his memories were true was not the issue. What was interesting was that at the end of each lifetime, some exclamation came out naturally, which was, "What suffering! All that effort for what?" You think of all the effort we put into our lives and then the question is, "What's left? What do we have to show for it? Usually it's not even nothing. It's less than nothing when you put things into the balance.

So the question is, where is effort put that it really does pay off? That's what the Buddha called right effort. Right effort has to be built on right view. Right view starts with looking at life, seeing what it's like: The world is insufficient, a slave to craving, and it all comes from our desires. But then the Buddha doesn't say that all desires are bad. Some of them are skillful desires. They can actually take us away from suffering. Acting on that kind of desire is an effort that's really worthwhile. Life builds on our own actions, and our actions are built on our state of mind, which is why we're sitting here meditating, to see if we can master the skills that allow our desires to stop creating suffering and actually create a path to the end of suffering. That's the kind of effort that's well spent.

And the desires that lie under that effort: Those are desires worth cultivating. Always keep that in mind. Desire is an important part of the path. It's right there in the description of right effort: You generate desire to do the skillful thing. Of course, desires need something to feed on. That's why we have these

contemplations about the body, about aging, illness, and death. The contemplation doesn't just stop with the fact that we ourselves are subject to aging, illness, and death. Everybody born is subject to aging, illness, and death. We're not the only ones who get separated from the people and things we love. Everybody has to suffer from that. As long as there's birth, these things have to happen. When that fact hits you, it's called samvega. But at least samvega offers a way out. You don't sit around wondering, "Well, suppose I came back to try living like this, or try living like that, or try to get born into this level of society, try to get born into that level of being." You see that those queries are really ill advised. They go nowhere. Again: more effort spent for what? What results?

When the Buddha advises us to look at things as impermanent or inconstant, stressful, and not self, it's to remind us that we put a lot of effort into these things and that's all that can be created through our effort: things are inconstant, stressful, and not-self. Most things just end right there. The one thing you can put effort into that's different is the path. It actually opens you up to something different, another dimension entirely.

So that's where the effort is well spent. That's where it's worth it. You look at the rest of life and ask yourself: Look at all that effort that goes into it—is it worth it?

I remember listening to a lawyer who had fought for years and years and years for civil rights and other progressive causes, and then he started seeing the change that was coming in our country. He felt all that he had worked to build was being torn apart. That's the way it is in society. The pendulum swings back and forth. So the question is: Where is the effort worth it? And the Buddha said, "Right here, in right effort." With right effort, you're not only doing good things for yourself and other people, you're also developing good qualities in the mind—and those good qualities can take you beyond cause and effect.

That's what's really amazing about the Buddha's analysis of cause and effect. It's a type of cause and effect that can use the causal process to take you beyond the causal process, till you finally get to the point where you don't have to depend on desire or effort, but there is a deathless happiness.

The Buddha once said that if you could make a deal that you'd be speared every morning with a hundred spears, every noon with a hundred spears, every evening with a hundred spears, and this would happen every day for a hundred years, but at the end of that time, you'd be guaranteed awakening, it would be a good deal. And when the awakening finally arrived, you wouldn't think that it had been attained through pain and suffering. The experience of the bliss, the

sense of freedom would be so great that it would more than make up for the pain of all those spears.

Fortunately, we don't have to sit around getting speared. We can meditate, sitting here quietly and undisturbed, working on the qualities of the mind. That's what actually makes it happen.

So when the meditation gets difficult, keep asking yourself: Is this anywhere near as difficult as a hundred spears every morning, every evening, and every day at noon? Keep things in perspective. This kind of effort is really worth it. It goes someplace and it leaves you with something solid. Other kinds of effort in the world go a little place and then they turn around and they go back—or they bite you. So it's up to you to decide where the effort is worth it. But just keep remembering: We're fortunate that we have this path as an option; we have the Buddha and the Dhamma to point it out for us, and the Sangha to keep it alive.