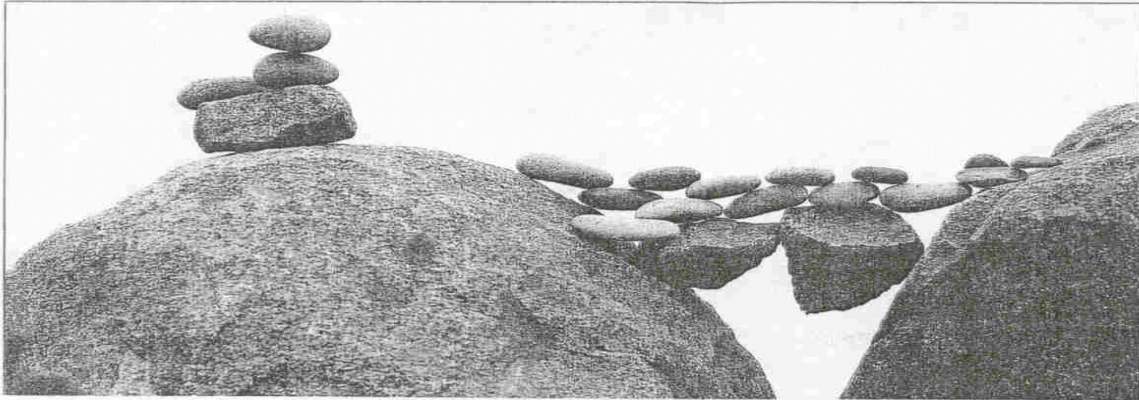


## Sacramento Insight Meditation



### Exploring Effort In Practice

#### It's All About Balance

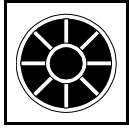
(November 6, 2005)

At the outset of embarking on any new venture, it's important to have an idea of what you're about to do, how you're going to do it, and where it will take you. In meditation practice, we refer to this initial perspective as *Skillful View or Understanding*. It may be helpful to understand this as Skillful Overview – the big picture. Skillful View has a number of components. One is the foundational role of experientially investigating our experience to see into its true nature leading to Insight, wisdom, and compassion.

Effort which supports or implements Skillful View is referred to as *Skillful Effort*. It has a number of components. One is the foundational role of balance as being the centerpiece of practice which allows Meditative Awareness, or Mindfulness, to appear, stabilize, and be maintained. Without Meditative Awareness experiential investigation and the resulting Insight, wisdom, and compassion are impossible.

It is not uncommon to hear practice described as a process of bringing the mind into a balance where it becomes calm, still, quiet, or at rest. This is the process of Skillful Effort. It is a dynamic and on-going process where the various elements of consciousness are balanced in a harmonious working symmetry to support Meditative Awareness. It is a process of finding a continuing middle path of relating to experience between the extremes of being pushed and pulled by mind states driven by desire and aversion. One way of understanding practice is an entering into a balanced relationship with all experience.

Skillful Effort requires us to flexibly adjust to the constantly changing conditions of the mind, body, our relationships, and the world around us. The Dali Lama, for example, talks about setting a firm intention to let nothing disturb the balance of our minds as a foundation for practice and daily life.



## Sacramento Insight Meditation

### Not View and Effort, But Skillful View and Effort

It's important to distinguish that it is skillful View and Effort that are considered necessary ingredients of practice, not merely view and effort. View and Effort are considered skillful if they point the mind towards clarity, balance, and peace. They are unskillful if they point the mind in the opposite directions, towards confusion, struggle, and dissatisfaction. Skillful View directs energy into skillful Effort rather than merely striving. Skillful Effort supports and implements Skillful View. Skillfulness is the factor that unifies all aspects of practice.

### Two Types of Skillful Effort

There are two primary types of Skillful Effort: abandoning what is unskillful and cultivating what is skillful.

*Abandoning what is unskillful* takes a number of different forms. It can take the form of avoiding circumstances, thoughts, or actions that tend to push the mind into agitation or confusion. It involves restraining or refraining from our tendency to engage in habitual conduct that is harmful to ourselves or others. It means taking steps to extract ourselves from unskillful thinking and conduct. It includes (1) reflecting, evaluating, and learning from past thoughts, speech, and conduct that was unhelpful; (2) committing to avoid similar actions in the future; and (3) developing a plan for avoiding, restraining, or extracting oneself in the future.

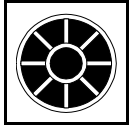
Sometimes the most skillful thing to do is simply refrain from doing anything at all. Just allowing the turbulence, the confusion, the strong emotion to settle. A common teaching image is of the debris on the bottom of a pond being stirred up so that the water becomes clouded. The Tao Te Ching asks the following questions:

Do you have the patience to wait until your mud settles and the water is clear? Can you remain unmoving until the right action arises by itself?

I recently noticed that my daughter had framed and put the following unattributed quotation on her bedroom wall which speaks to refraining from unskillful action and listening:

Listen to your heart. Finding out who you are is not simple. It takes time for the clutter to quiet down. In the silence of "not doing" we begin to know what we feel. If we listen and hear what is being offered, then anything in life can be our guide. Listen.

*Cultivating what is skillful* can take a number of different forms. It can take the form of nurturing and developing new or underdeveloped qualities of mind and skills such as the Seven Factors of Awakening. It involves stabilizing those that have already been developed. It includes cultivating counterbalancing qualities of mind such as generosity, kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity.



## Sacramento Insight Meditation

The analogy that is commonly used for Skillful Effort is of watering a seed. If we water the seed of Skillful View and Effort, the mind will be pointed in one direction. If we water the seed of unskillful View and Effort, the mind will be pointed in another direction.

### Skillfulness and The Five Hindrances

A good illustration of Skillful Effort is learning how to work with the so-called Five Hindrances. These are five broad categories of mind states considered to be major obstacles to Meditative Awareness. Each category has within it numerous derivative mind states, each acting to obstruct the ability of the mind to see clearly and be in balance. This occurs because our perception of experience is filtered through and distorted by the hindrance. An initial way to understand each hindrance follows:

*Aversion* which manifests as resistance, negativity, and discontent.

*Desire* which manifests as constant search for, and attempt to obtain, satisfaction.

*Mental Dullness* which manifests as indifference, boredom, and sleepiness.

*Restlessness* which manifests as an inability of the mind to settle and be at ease.

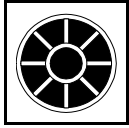
*Doubt* which manifests as confusion, ambivalence, and indecisiveness.

The problem with hindrances is that they tend to prevent the mind from opening to and connecting with whatever is present. Instead, the mind tends to move into attachment and identification which triggers reactivity based on habit and conditioning. The imbalance of the mind resulting from the hindrance makes us vulnerable to a sequence of hindrances.

For example, boredom may lead to restlessness which leads to frustration. Or a sense of unpleasantness leads to resistance which leads to irritation which leads to anger which leads to some form of unskillful action. A chain of reactivity begins with what is hardly noticeable and escalates into progressively more intense and more unskillful states of mind. In this regard, the Dalai Lama suggests that our initial concern should not be with anger and malice, but with discontent, because it is failing to see and work with discontent that leads the mind into anger and malice.

How does Skillful Effort come to play in working with the hindrances?

It's important to understand that the initial response to the Hindrances is not to try to make them go away or suppress them. It's to experientially investigate them and see into their true nature. This careful and systematic exploration of each hindrance is the central work of meditation. Understanding how to skillfully work with each hindrance during formal meditation and in daily life is a pre-condition to becoming free from their influence.



## Sacramento Insight Meditation

So we experientially and patiently investigate the conditions that cause each of the hindrances to arise, or be triggered, in our lives. What is our usual way of responding to each of them? How do they manifest in our body, thinking, and emotions? How does one hindrance lead to another and then to unskillful speech or action? What is the impact of each of these on our performance and relationships? Have we developed skillful ways of working with each of them, or are we at their mercy when they appear?

When a hindrance reaches a level of intensity, however, so as to compromise Meditative Awareness, to throw the mind so out of balance that we are unable to be present with and investigate it, Skillful Effort calls for us to intervene.

Each of the hindrances has one or more mind states or qualities of mind that are intentionally cultivated to rebalance the mind. The different forms of abandoning unskillful mind states and conduct, discussed above, can each also be applied to the hindrances. Both cultivating and abandoning involve regularly rebalancing the mind as hindrances appear during meditation or in daily life. They also involve efforts to develop particular states and qualities of mind that undermine the appearance of the hindrances in the first place. In each instance, the objective is to create a new and more skillful relationship with, and way of engaging, each hindrance.

### Exploring Skillful View, and Effort, and The Hindrances

#### Recommendations

Here's several recommendations for using the process of listening to begin working with Skillful View and Effort, and the Hindrances.

Watch for the appearance of aversion in the form of resistance to what is being said during a conversation. Notice where you can feel the resistance in your body and how it feels. Notice how it feels in the mind. Explore whether there is an emotional tone to the resistance. Investigate how it affects your ability to be present and non-judgmentally hear what is being conveyed.

Consciously try to work with the resistance in two ways:

Begin by *abandoning* the reaction of resistance by connecting with its feeling in your body and mind and letting go, releasing, relaxing into the sensation. Allow the breath to open up and deepen, and for the body and mind to relax.

Begin to *cultivate* a new response to the resistance by setting an intention to focus on what is being conveyed with a new interest and more impartial attitude. Bring energy to really concentrate on the exchange – the tone of voice, the facial expressions, the choice of words, the body language, and the content of what is being said. Continue to monitor your own reactivity and work with abandoning it through letting go, releasing, and relaxing. Place yourself in the shoes of the other person and attempt to bring the type of kindness and compassion you would want to experience into your act of listening.

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