

Notes and Quotes for November 19, 2023 *Dharma Reflections*:

What's On the Path?

Part Seven:

***Vīryapāramitā* (*The Perfection of Enthusiastic Diligence, or Joyous and Persistent Exertion*)**

We're getting a better sense of where this bodhisattvas' path will take us, and we have accumulated a basket full of reasons why it would make sense to traverse the path. It can still seem so daunting, the goals so high and far-reaching. How does one get started? Where does the energy to oppose (or work with) all our karma and habit force come from? And once we recognize that the path is endless (we've heard for example the saying, "Even Shakyamuni Buddha is only halfway, and continues practicing in the Tushita Heaven"), how can one possibly keep going—in the face of discouragement, distractions, pains of all sorts, boredom... all the "slings and arrows" of Mara?

We might as well accept that it's going to take effort. And we'd best learn as we go along how better to attract, generate, nurture, and share this quality. Let's rouse our energies and dive in!

"Generosity, ethics, and patience are wholesome and beneficial expressions of compassion. Some enthusiasm and effort are useful from the beginning of the path, and we have employed our energy to develop these first three practices. Through patience, we have plugged up some of the places where our energy drains away. Now we are ready to move forward into the practices of liberation. We are ready to generate the keen and enthusiastic energy necessary to realize the practices of concentration and wisdom. p. 71.

"An important aspect of having enthusiasm, or warm-hearted practice, is to reflect on how good it is to act in accord with our aspirations. In this way, we discover the joy that is at the heart of our bodhisattva vow. In practicing with others like this, we are filled with great joy in practicing together and helping each other. p. 78.

- Entering The Mind of Buddha—Zen and the Six Heroic Practices of Bodhisattvas, Reb Anderson, Shambhala, 2019.

“Effort or diligence, *virya* in Sanskrit, is etymologically related to the word *virile*. The perfection of effort is the intensity, enthusiasm, and zeal to continue amidst adversity. Spiritual strength and stamina are required to persist on the path. Such heroic effort is about sustaining practice and attention. We continue and sustain our enthusiasm by keeping our balance. If our effort is too severe, if we push ourselves too hard and become too tightly wound, we may snap from the pressure. If we are too easy and lax with ourselves and our efforts, our energy will flag and we will also fail to continue. Enthusiasm and patience support each other and are complementary. Sustainable effort and endurance are two sides of the balance in continuing practice....

“Because of the relationship between *virya* and *virile*, we might associate this kind of heroic effort or energy with the stereotypical masculine image of a warrior. But effort also includes a more nurturing side, balancing firmness with flexibility. The fulfilled steadfastness and self-confidence of a heroic bodhisattva includes joyfulness and rest or recreation as well as exertion. This is sometimes referred to as effortless effort, persisting and continuing on our way as just the ongoing steps of our ordinary, everyday life. An aspect of holding firm is letting go, the willingness to start fresh from any point, to continue our efforts even when it seems we are starting all over....

“Bodhisattva effort is fortified with the aspiration and intention to aid suffering beings and to realize awakening. When we look around at the suffering of the world, in the larger world or in our own lives, we can feel and recognize some urgency not to become lazy and give up our best efforts. Each of us has a unique job to do. Each of us has our own special calling, something each of us can offer that is asking us to pay attention and exert ourselves.s

“Enthusiasm supports and depends on many of the other practices. Meditation and mindfulness practices can help us marshal and care for our energy. Effort is an expression of vow or commitment. Such a bodhisattva vow is the starting point for developing our spiritual energy and vitality.”

- *Faces of Compassion—Classic Bodhisattva Archetypes and Their Modern Expression*,
Taigen Dan Leighton, Wisdom, 2012, pp. 71-72.

“The great Way of the Buddha and Dharma Ancestors involves the highest form of exertion, which goes on unceasingly in cycles from the first dawn of religious truth, through the test of

discipline and practice, to enlightenment and Nirvana. It is sustained exertion, proceeding without lapse from cycle to cycle...

“This sustained exertion is not something which people of the world naturally love or desire, yet it is the last refuge of all. Only through the exertions of the Buddhas in the past, present and future do the Buddhas of past, present, and future become a reality... By this exertion Buddhahood is realized, and those who do not make an exertion when exertion is possible are those who hate Buddha, hate serving the Buddha, and hate exertion; they do not want to live and die with Buddha, they do not want him as their teacher and companion.

- From *The Three Pillars of Zen*, 35th anniversary edition, Anchor Books, 2000, pp. 28-29, citing: “Quoted in *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, edited by William Theodore de Bary, Columbia University Press, 1961, pp. 250-251.

“Students find two problems with *Vīrya*. The first is: What should I do if *Vīrya* is not well developed? The second is: How should I maintain *Vīrya* in the workaday world, with all its demands and distraction? These are intimately related questions.

“*Vīrya*, like patience, like sincerity, like inquiry, like Samadhi, builds with practice. As Yasutani Roshi would say, five percent is enough to start with. If you have enough vitality and stick-to-it-tiveness to sit through twenty-five minutes of zazen, then you have quite a lot of spiritual zeal. If you have the gumption to ask the teacher a probing question even though you think it might be considered irrelevant or rude, then you are well along on your pilgrimage....

“The human being by nature is inadequate, practices zazen inadequately, realizes true nature inadequately. This is the *Vīrya Pāramitā*. On and on we persevere, like a small child determined to learn how to walk while continually falling down, or like a very old person getting up in the middle of the night, lurching from wall to wall to reach the bathroom.

“Then how can you find a way through the distractions of conventional society? I would suggest you ask yourself, ‘What is my purpose?’ Everything follows from your response to this question....

“Who is in charge here? Daily life experiences can always be instructive. The first lesson is that *distraction* or *obstruction* are just negative terms for context. Circumstances are like your arms and legs. They appear in your life to serve your practice. As you become more and more settled in your purpose, your circumstances begin to synchronize with your concerns. Chance words by friends, books, and poems, even the wind in the trees bring precious insights....

“Traditionally, Vīrya has three aspects: character formation, religious training, and altruism. Character formation can be guided by others if we listen to their criticism....

“(S)piritual training is a matter of taking one’s practice in hand—of not depending solely on the teacher or even the Sangha or even on the practice itself to do it....

“Moreover, the practice is not just settled, exacting meditation and realization. It is study as well...

“The third aspect of Vīrya is called altruism, but when you read the commentaries you find that a broad range of qualities is subsumed under this single heading. Follow-through... is one of these qualities. It begins with the breath. I want to give the most circumspect attention to my breathing and to completing each breath. In, out, in, out. Follow-through is a matter of completing each breath and each action, leaving nothing half-done....

“Another quality under this heading of altruism would be optimism and still another would be application. Confidence in myself as the Buddha’s avatar builds with practice. I develop an eagerness to undertake difficult tasks. This is noble aspiration, I hope, and should be distinguished from vanity and arrogance....

“On his great realization, the Buddha exclaimed, ‘All beings are the Tathagata. Only their delusions and preoccupations keep them from testifying to that fact.’ Tathagata is one who ‘thus comes’—another name for Buddha. Rid yourself of delusions and preoccupations and you’ve got it. You have a hard time with this because your nature is the same as his. He had to practice hard too. Don’t give up!”

- *The Practice of Perfection—The Pāramitās from a Zen Buddhist Perspective*, Robert Aitken, Pantheon Books, 1994, pp. 69-73.

“The perfection of effort or energy is vital for all practices. You know how to do many things: drive a car, get on a plane. There are so many things you do automatically which you had to learn, and took time to learn. Think about the number of years you went to school and learned a job for a purpose restricted to this life. In Dharma, it is important to understand that advancing toward enlightenment and attaining Buddhahood cannot happen without enthusiastic perseverance or effort. Whatever the practice, we must first listen to the instruction and then apply it energetically. We should dedicate more time and energy to the practice of Dharma than to our worldly studies, because its benefits are much more far-reaching; they exceed the limited framework of this life.”

- *Luminous Mind—The Way of the Buddha*, Kalu Rinpoche, Wisdom, 1997, p. 149.

“The Paramita of Diligence

“It is extremely important to never lay aside our efforts to hear and reflect upon the teachings and never give up the practice of the three trainings. With a fully perfected sense of diligence, we should apply ourselves to virtue without delay; not leaving it abandoned and forgotten in the ravine of the three kinds of laziness. Rather we should be like the swans who hatch their eggs in a thicket but take to the water as soon as their chicks are strong enough.

“THE THREE KINDS OF LAZINESS

“(1 [An inclination to unwholesome ways]) People are inextricably entangled in the affairs of this world. They are engrossed in them, overwhelmed by the bustle of mundane activities and society. They cling to their dear ones; they repudiate their adversaries; they immerse themselves in the accumulation, preservation, and increase of wealth. And from all these cares, they cannot free themselves; they are like silkworms imprisoned in the cocoons of their own making. (2 [Discouragement]) Moreover, they are overpowered by the laziness of discouragement and tell themselves that they are unable to accomplish even those achievements of Dharma that are only slightly difficult. Destitute of energy in the practice of virtue, they constantly postpone it. (3 [Self-contempt]) And they put themselves down with thoughts like, ‘Oh, but how could I ever do such things?’ To wallow in this kind of depression is to cut ourselves off from the Dharma....

“THE THREE KINDS OF DILIGENCE

“.... The first is *courageous, armorlike diligence*, impervious to any adverse circumstance.

“The second... is *diligence in action*. This is the gradual implementation of the threefold discipline of the four paths of learning whereby—never losing the defenses of one’s courageous pledge—one brings to completion the five paths and perfects the ten grounds. The third and final protection against the four demons is never to transgress one’s pledge to benefit others, nor to allow one’s diligence to weaken, either in intention or action. This indeed should be irreversible under all circumstances, regardless of the qualities of the path that might arise. This is referred to as *insatiable diligence*.

- *Treasury of Precious Qualities—Book One: Sutra Teachings*, Revised edition, Jigme Lingpa, Translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2010, pp. 322-323.

“The recollection and cultivation of the spirit of enlightenment—the basis of the bodhisattva deeds—inspires you to train in order to set all living beings in joyous perseverance. So steadily increase this spirit, and then aspire to and train in the methods of joyous perseverance for those high levels. Also, strive as you are able at the methods of learning joyous perseverance for a beginning bodhisattva. In particular, effectively stop the various forms of discouragement, these being uniquely subject to elimination by joyous perseverance. Mentally put on the armor of joyous perseverance that is enthusiastic about the following: the goal of enlightenment, the aim of accomplishing the happiness and eliminating the suffering of all living beings, the very long period of time, the limitless collections, and the immeasurable hardships. Strive at this attitude because, as the *Questions of Subahu Sutra* says, just by generating the powerful surge of such a resolve, you accumulate a great wave of merit.... If you then joyously persevere to the extent that you are able... you will quickly complete the perfection of joyous perseverance in future lives, without suffering and with little difficulty.”

- *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment (LAM RIM CHEN MO)*, Tsong-Kha-Pa, The Lamrim Chenmo Translation Committee, Snow Lion, 2004, pp. 206-207.

“The perfection of joyous effort is a mind that takes delight in developing virtuous qualities. It does not refer to effort in general, because people may make great effort to accomplish nonvirtuous aims and that is definitely not included here!

“Joyous effort is extremely important because it enables us to engage in difficult work or sustained Dharma practice and bring it to fruition. By assessing an activity well before committing to it, and then once committed, carrying it through to completion, our confidence will increase and become stable. In addition, practices or tasks that were previously difficult will become easier because we are now familiar with them, and with sustained joyous effort, we will be able to accomplish them. Joyous effort enables our spiritual development to progress smoothly as we gradually gain realizations of the path. As Candrakirti said,

*All attainments follow after effort,
the cause of the two collections of merit and wisdom.*

“Once our goal of Buddhahood is clearly understood, we have more energy to attain it. When it is not very clear, laziness easily sneaks in. To remedy this, think about the qualities of awakening and the possibility to attain it. This will inspire our effort to fulfill the two causes of full awakening, the collections of merit and wisdom.

“The joyous effort that takes delight in mental transformation and the bodhisattvas’ practices enables us to easily fulfill the two collections. Because these two are the essential causes to attain the truth body and form body of a buddha, joyous effort is said to be the source of all auspicious attainments.

“At initial stages of practice, your ability to practice is naturally weak, but with repeated practice your capacity will increase. When it becomes strong, you will look back at your original state and see that what initially seemed almost impossible has now become possible and you have accomplished what you did not think you could. Your inner capabilities have grown through the passage of time because you made effort.

“For example, at the beginning, engaging in just one practice on the method side of the path—let’s say subduing your anger through the practice of fortitude—may seem almost inconceivable; let alone doing a practice in which method and wisdom are combined, by contemplating that you, your anger, the action of being angry, and the person you’re angry at are empty of inherent existence but exist dependently. However, as you joyously put energy into cultivating one good quality, then another, and another, you will eventually be able to do a practice of combined wisdom and method. Each new quality will increase your capacity, and because you remain steadfast and continue to practice, your progress will increase exponentially and realizations will automatically dawn....

“With *joy* we consistently and continuously act according to bodhicitta. Just as an elephant scorched by the midday sun in India plunges into a cool pool, with the same joy bodhisattvas are filled with joyous energy when it comes to creating virtue. Rather than impatiently anticipating the goal, they enjoy the process of creating the causes for full awakening.”

- *Courageous Compassion (Volume 6, The Library of Wisdom and Compassion)*, The Dalai Lama with Thubten Chodron, Wisdom, 2021. Pp. 71-77.

“(W)hen practicing dharma you should be like a hungry yak eating grass, who eats so that before finishing one mouthful, he looks ahead to the next....

“Until perfect enlightenment is attained, there are karma and habitual tendencies to be relinquished and there are ever higher qualities to obtain. Therefore, with heartfelt enthusiasm and without being satisfied with what you have already accomplished in the dharma, you should be diligent....

“As the main method for developing diligence, one should meditate on and develop a genuine sense of impermanence....

“Jetsun Milarepa said:

Recalling death repeatedly, one becomes victorious over the mara of laziness.
If you bring impermanence to mind, all that you do will go toward the dharma.”

- *A Guide to the Thirty-Seven Practices of a Bodhisattva*, Dzatrul Ngawang Tenzin Norbu, Snow Lion, 2020, Pp. 151-153.

Possible Discussion Points:

1. Reb Anderson (p. 1) makes some clear connections between the first six Paramitas, especially how effort is required to realize concentration and wisdom. Consider how concentration and wisdom can themselves support effort.
2. Taigen Dan Leighton (p. 2) points out how important *balance* is to sustaining our exertions: “enthusiasm and patience support each other,” which leads into his talking about “effortless effort, persisting and continuing on our way as just the ongoing steps of our ordinary, everyday life.” How can we keep from getting sloppy or lazy if we take this view?
3. Do you find Dogen’s language (p. 3) to be too extreme: “those who do not make and exertion when exertion is possible are those who hate Buddha, hate serving the Buddha, and hate exertion?”
4. Isn’t it heartening to be told by no less a figure than Yasutani Roshi (p. 3), “five percent is enough to start with?”
5. Speaking of “daily life,” (p. 3), what do you think of Aitken Roshi’s assertion that “*distraction* or *obstruction* are just negative terms for context. Circumstances are like your arms and legs. They appear in you life to serve your practice?”
6. The Dalai Lama (p. 6) encourages us to be “enthusiastic about the following:...the very long period of time,... and the immeasurable hardships.” How about that?
7. We read several metaphors for *virya* that arose from the observation of animals in nature: “be like the swans who hatch their eggs in a thicket but take to the water as soon as their chicks are strong enough,” (p. 5) “Just as an elephant scorched by the midday sun in India plunges into a cool pool, with the same joy bodhisattvas are filled with joyous energy when it comes to creating virtue,” (p. 7) and “you should be like a hungry yak eating grass, who eats so that before finishing one mouthful, he looks ahead to the next. (p. 7) | exertion inherent in biology? In what sense is exertion natural, and how is access to it always available?