The Benefits Of Perfecting Right Effort And Persistence

As the investigation of the Paramis continues, the focus of attention shifts to viriya, the application of energy in ways that foster the process of awakening. Viriya is often mentioned in the Buddhist commentaries and suttas. In contemporary terms, we can understand energy as the delivery of glucose and oxygen to the cells of the body, providing fuel for whatever activity might be involved. In the brain, the fueling of the neural pathways that produce subjective awareness is of most interest.

We know from modern research technology that blood flow increases to areas of the brain that are actively processing experience. Those areas that are most persistently activated become more richly endowed with interneuronal connectivity, and are more easily activated over time. In scientific jargon, this is called “long-term potentiation”. One of the primary tasks involved in the process of Buddhist Awakening is the intentional direction of attention to neuronal pathways that produce the factors conducive to overcoming dukkha, that is, distress and confusion.

This process applies the part of the Noble Eightfold Path called “Right Effort”. This is the effort to notice and interrupt the channeling of energy to unwholesome neuronal pathways, combined with the effort to redirect the channeling of energy towards the optimal activation of wholesome neuronal pathways. As the wholesome pathways are repeatedly activated, long-term potentiation is reinforced. The perfection of this potentiation is the goal of the Parami of viriya.

During previous explorations of the Paramis, excerpts from “The Perfections Leading to Enlightenment *by Sujin Boriharnwanaket, t*ranslated by Nina van Gorkom” have been quoted, and this one is relevant to viriya:

Energy has the characteristic of striving; its function is to fortify; its manifestation is indefatigably; an occasion for the arousing of energy, or a sense of spiritual urgency, is its proximate cause.

Striving is not about tension or using a “white knuckle” approach. Rather, it is the intentional channeling of the flow of energy, diverting attention away from unwholesome self-state organizations and towards wholesome self-state organizations. Imagine two streams that emerge from one at a gated fork; striving is the effort to swing the gate from the unwholesome stream to the wholesome one. Any tension noted is related to the “stickiness” of craving and clinging to the unwholesomeness.

Regarding “indefatigably”, the cultivation of consistent, mindful attention is key. This term describes the progression towards perfection. Initially, we learn to guide attention using mindfulness of breathing meditation practice. Every time attention is diverted away from any distraction, wholesome or unwholesome, back to the breath, striving is activated. The indefatigability of that action manifests as samadhi/passadhi, that is, stability and calmness in the flow of energy. Then, when vipassana is applied to the process, the ability to notice the difference between unwholesome and wholesome self-state organizations combines investigation and Right Effort. Renunciation, another of the Paramis, fosters rechanneling attention repeatedly to the wholesome emergences.

This noticing process is typically inconsistent and intermittent. The cultivation of the Parami creates an ongoing process of investigation and renunciation. As this process becomes more perfected, investigation notes the more subtle self-state organizing process—there is an ongoing awareness of the process of “selfing”, that is, the creation of a sense of self that is superimposed on the perceptual process. This awareness is nondual, that is, awareness doesn’t identify with the process of making sense out of primary sensual experience as separated. This is the process of awakening at its fullest potential—a moment of Awakening. When the mind is well-trained, this ability to just experience undifferentiated “flow” becomes apparent; this is more accessible than one might imagine—just look closer at what happens in awareness as frequently as possible.