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From Effort to Effortlessness: The Six Gates of Breath Meditation

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Playing in a garden among the cherry trees, I stretch out for a nap in my little hut.

—Ryokan (1758–1831), *One Robe, One Bowl*, translated by John Stevens

As a young monk, I loved this poem and the many like it, the images of Ryokan and other great Zen masters of old living out the fulfillment of the Buddha Way by wandering the forests, giggling with children, resting when tired, and eating when hungry. So pure! So free! So refreshing!

My teachers and elders appreciated Ryokan's napping as well, but when I did it, they didn't appreciate it nearly as much. My naps simply ended in my teachers exhorting me to return to meditation.

The message seems to be that there is some big difference between Ryokan's napping and my own. Of course, the distinction is dubious: "Do as I say, not as I do." But it also reveals a vital point in our practice, a dynamic between effort and non-effort.

Ryokan's nap expresses the effortlessness that all Buddhists understand as the end of the path. Granted, not all Buddhists picture their sages giggling with children—some prefer, for example, the motionless recluse, the stark and clear mountaintop. Whatever the image, though, we picture the

enlightened ones as free from the baggage of striving and effort. Striving always comes from delusion—“there’s a problem here and I’m going to fix it”—and it invariably causes anxiety and agitation. We celebrate Ryokan because he represents freedom from all of this.

And what about my napping? The young monk’s nap represents something else entirely—a lack of sincerity and intention, a failing of the very effort that will paradoxically be needed to realize Ryokan’s effortlessness. To pretend to just “go with the flow”—*I just nap when I’m tired!*—before having “gone against the stream” of my own deep and destructive habits of body and mind is simply abdicating my vows of practice. Yes, selflessness and effortlessness mean just going with the flow, but we must go against the stream of our deep selfishness to fully enter it.

How then do we hold and harmonize both of these poles in our practice? What is the interplay between the discipline that keeps exhausted young monks awake and the effortlessness that invites the sages to the shade of pine trees?

A perfect way to explore this dynamic, to study how effort and non-effort intertwine, is by engaging with breath meditation.

The Effort of Breathing Naturally

There are some Buddhist practices of breath manipulation, but the baseline Buddhist teaching with respect to breath meditation is non-manipulation, or “natural breathing.” The reason is obvious and profound: if we want to see how things truly are, why don’t we just look at how they truly are right now? Why would we think that we need to first change them?

Accordingly, the Buddha did not teach that one should extend the out-breath, or hold the in-breath, or rest in the space between out-breath and in-breath, or still the breath completely, or deepen the breath, or ripple or pause or suspend the in- or out-breath. He didn’t teach any of these delicious breath-control

practices well known and much practiced by meditators throughout history and the world over. The Buddha just asked us to look at, to know precisely, the breath we have right now. As he taught in the *Anapanasati Sutta* and elsewhere, when the breath is long, we know that it's long. When it's short, we know that it's short. That's all.

Why then, in Zen meditation instruction, are we taught to focus on *hara*, the lower belly, to pull or push or coax the breath down there as deep as it goes? We celebrate this physical and spiritual center with terms like the Ocean of Energy and the Field of Transformative Elixir. But such an emphasis seems on its face quite contrary to the Buddha's teaching, like a clear-cut case of breath manipulation.

Finding, breathing from, and abiding in this belly center is generally seen as demanding great effort—Katsuki Sekida, author of *Zen Training: Methods and Philosophy*, instructs students to find it by imagining flinging themselves against a solid door! It is a powerful and tremendously energizing practice, to be sure. But what does it have to do with “natural breathing”? We seem a long way from simply “knowing it's long” or “knowing it's short.”

As we study the interplay of effort and effortlessness, though, we can begin to see how this *hara* practice might in fact bring us closer to truly natural breathing.

It can be forced or taken too far, of course, but what if we see effortful *hara* breath as a way of clearing out the constrictions that hold the breath “unnaturally” hostage in the chest? Isn't our most natural breathing, after all, really belly breath? At least in my experience, with the serenely dying and the newly born, the rise and fall of their *hara* has been evident. At these life moments of least constriction, least manipulation, the breath finds its way home to *hara*.

So maybe *hara* breathing is forcing the breath—but forcing it back home. Would we call that manipulation, or is it a step closer to the truly effortless?

Getting to the Effortless

In *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, Suzuki Roshi described the path to the effortless like this:

Strictly speaking, any effort we make is not good for our practice because it creates waves in our mind. It is impossible, however, to attain absolute calmness of our mind without any effort... So it is necessary for us to encourage ourselves and to make an effort up to the last moment, when all effort disappears.

This kind of description is common to most styles of Buddhist meditation; they vary in the details, but they share this trajectory from a coarse or heavy-handed effort to a subtle one, and ultimately to no effort at all.

An old text that I have been working with recently, *The Six Marvelous Dharma Gates*, expresses quite beautifully this flow of practice in the context of breath meditation. It is among the works of Master Zhiyi (538–597), the great synthesizer of practice and doctrine in sixth-century China and the founder of the enormously influential Tiantai (Tendai) School. In it, Zhiyi uses the frame of the six gates of breath meditation to wander through and map a trajectory from effort to non-effort.

The First Gate: Counting

As for the cultivation of counting, the practitioner regulates and harmonizes the breath so that it is neither too rough nor too subtle. One proceeds in an unhurried fashion, slowly counting, going from “one” on up to “ten.” One focuses the mind on the counting and does not allow it to run off and become scattered.

—Zhiyi, *The Six Dharma Gates to the Sublime* (translated by Bhikshu Dharmamitra, Kalavinka Press, 2009)

Breath counting is the first gate, the first practice, and it is just what it sounds like. You count the breaths, one to ten. It continues to amaze me that such a basic, contrived, downright gimmicky practice is as ancient as it is, more than two thousand years old. Something about this simple practice of giving a silent

number to each breath is such a straightforward and powerful tool of concentration that it has survived the centuries to become the initiatory practice of Zen. It seems there's nothing else quite like it to harmonize the body, breath, and mind.

This simple practice was a touchstone for Suzuki Roshi, which, given that most of his students were beginners, may not be surprising. It is an instruction he came back to again and again in his teaching, and it was clearly close to his heart. He was not put off in the slightest by its artificiality or how boring it is; he taught that precisely as central to its value:

You may think it is silly to count your breath from one to ten, losing track of the count and starting over. If you use a computer, there will not be any mistake. But the underlying spirit is quite important. While we are counting each number, we find that our life is limitlessly deep... To count each breath is to breathe with our whole mind and body. We count each number with the power of the whole universe. So when you really experience counting your breath, you will have deep gratitude... You will not be so interested in something just because it is considered great, or uninterested in something usually considered to be small.

—*Not Always So: Practicing the True Spirit of Zen* (Harper Collins 2002)

Here Suzuki Roshi is affirming counting not just as a first stage of practice but as an entry point into the unfathomable reality of our life and all existence. And for Zhiyi too, this practice of just counting doesn't need to be understood only as part of a path to something, one in a sequence of gates we must gradually traverse. Zhiyi also invites us, as he does at every gate along the way, to stay here, to realize the whole Buddhist path through nothing more than breath counting. Just in this counting—in “one,” or “two,” or “seven”—we can realize complete liberation, total effortless freedom.

The Second Gate: Following

Assuming we are staying in the sequence, though, setting out on this path from effort to effortless, we practice counting only for a time; maybe a few minutes, maybe a full period of meditation, maybe a few years of concerted practice. Zhiyi recommends we spend several days of concentrated practice at each

gate, but I find the trajectory helpful to explore even in a single period of meditation.

Zhiyi describes how, as we settle into the counting, the breath will grow smoother and more subtle, as will the effort of attention. As the breath and the mental effort quiet down, there may emerge a sense that the counting is not really helping anymore. It is no longer supporting our deepening concentration—it has actually become rather loud in our head, more a distraction than anything. What’s all that inward shouting about numbers? Can’t we just sit here awhile, alone with the breath? As Zhiyi puts it, at this point “one’s state of mind is such that one does not wish to engage in counting.”

It can’t be emphasized enough that this “not wishing to engage in counting” is not the same as just giving up on the practice. It isn’t that we’re bored counting, or that we never really committed to it in the first place and are fishing around for something else to do. Sloughing off one practice and sliding into another (or out of practice entirely) is, as often as not, simple laziness, forgetting or bailing on the practice that we sat down intending to do.

Honoring the trajectory is altogether different—we are letting go of the counting in order to follow the path toward further subtlety. There can be some effort here, some hand in letting loose or relinquishing the heavier effort, but ideally this process is utterly natural, effortless. We just naturally turn away from the counting and toward the quieter practice of following. Counting drops away like an autumn leaf.

At this point, we don’t add anything new to our meditation. The counting has fallen away, but the attention on the breath is still there. It’s the same practice, just with no number. In modern Zen, this second gate, “following,” is understood as the second phase of meditation practice: what Zhiyi describes as “relying single-mindedly on following the coming in and going out of the breath.”

I sometimes think of this practice as a form of counting, but just counting to one. Our full attention is on this one breath. We don’t need to bother with what comes before and after, we don’t need to track any sequence—we are just totally absorbed in this one breath.

Here again, as we realize this practice, the attention, the object, and the effort grow quieter still.

Zhiyi explains:

[S]ince the mind has become fine and subtle, it becomes peaceful, still, and free of any disorderliness. One becomes aware of the breath as now long, now short, as now pervading the body, as now coming in, and as now going out. The mind and the breath carry on in a state of mutual interdependence. The deliberations of the mind become tranquil and fixed in a state of stillness.

And so here too, something naturally starts to seem loud. This time it's the following that starts to feel a little obnoxious. Why am I working so hard at holding my attention to this thing—breath? Why not just sit here awhile? It starts to feel arbitrary that we would pick out this sensation—breath—from the totality of the body and the suchness of this vast moment. Why continue this effort to narrow the attention on breath, thereby stirring those waves in the mind? Why not just let ourselves fall deeper and deeper into this silence and stillness?

Zhiyi says of this turn in the process that it's like when you're exhausted and want to go to sleep—the various efforts of your day are just no fun anymore. You are done. As with the relinquishment of counting, it's not avoidance of anything, it's just time to move on: "I'm done, goodnight!" So you stop. You let go, even of the following.

Pop!

Before we go further along this path toward effortlessness, we might need a reality check. Around here somewhere, maybe as we settle into following, or attempt to relinquish following, our meditation may well go POP!—and not in a good way. We've fallen in a ditch by the roadside. What we hoped would be subtlety has degenerated into distraction and dispersion.

It's important that we notice this, brush ourselves off, and start over again. A minute ago, or five minutes ago, it might have felt like time to let go of the counting and rest in the quieter following, but we

need to stay tuned and see how it is *now*. We may have felt that we no longer needed the support of the counting. But judging by our state of complete distraction, it turns out we were wrong!

I often recall Norman Fischer sharing with me his experience as abbot of San Francisco Zen Center, as he began meeting with more and more students and hearing the gory details of people's actual practice of meditation. As I recall it, Norman noticed that most of us imagine we are practicing some subtle practice. But if we're being honest with ourselves or our teachers, it's clear that mostly we've been spinning our wheels. So Norman started telling more of us to stop kidding ourselves—stop trying to do the subtle practice and just go back to counting breath.

This practice is not a one-way street. In the art of meditation, we need to understand this flow—when is concentration softening and opening, and when is it simply dispersing, fading into drowsiness or distraction? Yes, the trajectory of the practice is from effortful to effortless, but it's not a single straight line. It's a weaving and wandering—here more open and subtle, here more directed and intense. To stay honest, we need to stay aware of this. As the range of attention gets too broad, or the effort too subtle, we can, without noticing, slip away from our meditation entirely. That's a good time to just come back to “one.” Or to come back to following. Zhiyi too is clear about this teaching: we must see what our practice needs and have the presence of mind and creativity to respond to it.

The Third Gate: Stabilizing, Stopping

Let's assume that we've followed our breath now for a time, realized the fruits of that effort, and feel an exquisite fineness of mind, breath, and attention. Here we come into a deep rest, a deep stillness. We stop. Everything stops.

There is not much to say here, but Zhiyi tells us, “As for the cultivation of stabilization, one puts to rest all forms of object-oriented thought process. One does not engage in either counting or following. One fixes one's mind and makes it still.”

We might want to say the breath is there, but even to call it “breath” is not quite right—that’s precisely the kind of “object-oriented thought process” that Zhiyi is saying is suspended at this point. Here, there is just stillness and perfect silence.

So are we done? Are we "effortless" yet? On some level, yes.

But the teaching of Zhiyi and many other Buddhist teachers, ancient and modern, is that at this stage we have yet to address the knots in the mind. Our effort really has stopped, but there isn’t yet any true clarity beneath it. We’ve suspended the agitated mind but haven’t transformed it; when we stand up, we will still be deluded. We’re what Vipassana teacher Larry Rosenberg calls “calm fools.”

Furthermore, as Zhiyi points out, the reason we are so calm is simply that the conditions have lined up for a while to support our concentration. Probably the room was quiet, or the light was dim enough. But inevitably the conditions will change, and as a result the concentration will break. We may have mastered finding calm in this silent sitting among comfortable surroundings, but we have not seen into reality, haven’t learned the tools or insights that will allow us to live as liberated beings no matter the conditions that befall us.

So in Zhiyi’s telling, somewhere in the midst of our enjoyment of this profound stillness, it occurs to us that we are only halfway up the mountain, that there is no real or lasting wisdom present. And we realize that in the absence of transformative wisdom, this deep calm, wonderful as it is, is just a subtler form of the attachment that keeps us bound in suffering. We see that it is time to wake the mind back up and to turn on the inquiring capacity that Bhikshu Dharmamitra translates as “illuminating intelligence.”

This marks the well-known turn from shamatha to vipassana, from practice centered on calming and stability to practice centered on inquiry and insight. While it may feel like a detour on the path to the effortless, Zhiyi’s next two gates express and celebrate this renewal of effort.

The Fourth and Fifth Gates: Contemplation and Turning

What is breath? In the fourth gate, “contemplation,” we invite our “illuminating intelligence”—our natural curiosity and wonder—to inquire deeply into the breath itself. Zhiyi encourages us to study closely its fine and subtle features as it moves in and out. “It is like a wind,” he says, “in the midst of space.” But let’s not take his word for it. What do *you* say? In this phase of the practice we ask that question wholeheartedly, bringing all of our physical and mental energy into the inquiry. *What is breath?*

This deep, direct, and sincere inquiry dislodges some of the staleness or stuckness or passivity that can occur in breath practice. It invites us into wonder, even awe. It is not that we answer the question but that we turn toward it, and in doing so become ever more intimate with the breath itself. We are no longer meditating on a superficial idea of the breath—*yeah, yeah, the breath, it goes in and out*—but are turning toward the unfathomable *suchness* of the breath itself.

And who is it who breathes? At the fifth gate, “turning,” having studied the breath, probed what it actually is, we turn to the one who studies the breath. Here we might ask simply, “Who breathes?”

We have now counted the breath, followed it, and enjoyed the deep silence and stillness that can result. We then perhaps managed to pull ourselves out of what Jiyu Kennett Roshi memorably calls that “lake of quietism” and inquired with full wonder and awe: “What is breath?” But who is it, exactly, who has been doing all of this? Who counted, who followed, who stopped, who contemplated? Here we allow the breath to draw us into that fundamental question of the spiritual life: “Who am I, really?”

This, as Zhiyi puts it, is to “turn back the direction of one’s contemplation” and “contemplate that very mind that is engaged in contemplation.” It is self-reflection akin to what Master Dogen calls the “backward step” that “turns the light and shines it inward.” Zhiyi says what we find there is not some fixed “true nature” or “real essence”; what we find there defies all expression. What we find right here—in this *who* right now—cannot be captured, packaged, or conceptually conveyed.

The Sixth Gate: No Inside, No Outside

At the final gate, we've entered full realization. Insofar as there's no trace of any self-centered effort, we're back at stabilization. Underlying that stillness now, though, is the wisdom born of the transformation of the habits of body and mind.

At this gate, there is no effort and no grasping. There is neither the grasping that we consciously experience nor the deep, automatic grasping at "self" and "other" that characterizes ordinary existence. It's not that we now "know" something that we didn't before. Beyond subject and object, self and other, "knowing" has no bearing. As Zhiyi describes it, this dualistic structure that shapes our whole encounter with reality has collapsed.

In short, we have arrived at liberation. We have arrived at the truly effortless.

Time to stretch out for a nap in our huts?

The Wild Garden of Meditation

Zhiyi's sequential structure of the Six Gates is useful; it's also consistent with the *Anapanasati Sutta* and a raft of other early teachings. But Zhiyi's project also diverges from them. His is more expansive than a single perspective; his map covers much more than a single path.

So after Zhiyi lays out the "sequential development" of the Six Gates, this step-by-step science of breath meditation, he then starts to splash color on it, to mix it up, to trade in the science for art.

For example, as noted in the discussion of counting, he invites us to simply take one gate to break all the way through to liberation. Just staying in breath counting, for example, one can realize and express the fullest liberation. Alternately, he invites us to use one gate to realize any other one: let the counting

fulfill the turning or the stabilizing; let the contemplation realize the counting or the turning. And so on. These practices interpenetrate. They include one another and realize one another. To just see the science is to miss this art, this tangle, this life—the wild garden of meditation.

Zhiyi invites us to follow the sequence, or to respond as the “suitability” demands, applying whichever gate is appropriate, whichever one best meets the particular person or moment. Or, he suggests, we might bypass the sequence in order to “counteract” any obstruction we may be facing—to pick up counting when our mind is wandering, to follow when we’re drowsy, to stabilize when we’re anxious, and so on. He also invites us to assess what sort of practitioner we are—to reflect on what we intend and what we have realized—and adjust our approach based on that.

The Bodhisattva Breathing

As a Mahayana Buddhist, Zhiyi also teaches these Six Gates with what he calls a “reversed orientation,” in which he sees the path not as moving away from the world of mud and convention and toward liberation but, rather, as a bodhisattva path, moving from liberation precisely back toward that world of mud and convention. After all, it’s there that the suffering beings reside; it’s there and only there that we can be of some help.

Here, the guiding principle, according to Zhiyi, is the bodhisattva’s vow: “[E]ven at that very time in which one is engaged in the counting of the breaths, one should generate the great vow and abide in compassionate regard for beings... even though one realizes that [they] are ultimately empty...” In this “reverse” practice of bodhisattvas, our breath practice not only realizes freedom and emptiness but also realizes and manifests the perfections of giving, morality, patience, energy, concentration, and wisdom. We can practice and know breath as giving, as patience, as energy, as ethics.

For me, this unity of breath and vow, of breath and the warm and compassionate heart, is the bedrock and in some sense the culmination of practice. Suzuki Roshi expresses this warm heart of breath

practice like this:

So we put emphasis on warm heart, warm zazen. The warm feeling we have in our practice is, in other words, enlightenment, or Buddha's mercy, Buddha's mind.... The point is, while inhaling and exhaling, to take care of the breath, just as a mother watches her baby. If a baby cries, the mother is worried. That kind of close relationship, being one with your practice, is the point.

—*Not Always So*

Both Zhiyi and Suzuki Roshi return to this again and again—that we should never fail to remember that our practice is ultimately about compassion.

Let the Practice Be Our Guide

Not long ago I was speaking with my root teacher, Sojun Mel Weitsman, about breath meditation and how I was working with Zhiyi's fifth gate of practice, which I express as "Who breathes?" Sojun looked at me and had a good laugh, a good and hearty *hara* laugh, saying, "That has nothing to do with Zen practice!"

Of course he's right, strictly speaking. In Soto Zen, at least, we really do just sit there. Call it *shikantaza*, "just sitting," "choiceless awareness," "objectless meditation," or what have you. It's about just sitting there, for forty minutes (more or less), unmoving, and seeing what happens—just finding your life right there. It's very pure in that regard, and very strict. As Kodo Sawaki and his disciples put it, it's meditation with no toys.

From that strictest perspective, all of this talk of gates—especially when they are seen sequentially—is utterly extra, beside the point. Can't we just sit here and not miss our life? We are always trying to get somewhere. Can't meditation finally be the place where we put that down?

Yes, of course. But then here we are again, back at square one: "Playing in a garden among the cherry trees, I stretch out for a nap in my little hut."

We are well served to honestly and fearlessly reflect upon and assess our own meditation practice. What do we intend for it? How do we wish to approach it? How will we thread the needle of effort and the effortless? How will we honor exactly the life that we have right now while also doing the work required to connect with and embrace it completely?

With a warm heart—diligent, not grasping, not averting, sitting still and wide open, wandering the wild gardens of meditation—may we let the practice itself be our guide. Open to exploring and experimenting and discerning, we enter the art of breath meditation and seek for, or stumble upon, these six marvelous gates in the ocean.