

Winter 2002: What is Wise Effort?

Question: Some teachers say that if you're having difficulty with your meditation you shouldn't force yourself to stay on the cushion. How do you know when you're forcing your meditation, instead of applying proper effort? Should you continue with the practice if you're feeling a lot of resistance and your mind is racing? Do you recommend short periods of meditation or longer ones?

Narayan Liebenson Grady: There is no set formula that applies to all practitioners. Shorter periods of sitting are fine, longer periods of sitting are fine. How to deal with resistance is the bigger question. A major part of practice involves learning how to work with resistance skillfully. This means learning how to befriend the experience of resistance, instead of viewing it as something other than practice that we have to get rid of in order to be able to practice.

Gradually we learn how to make our way gracefully through resistance by gently opening to it and seeing it as integral to practice. We find ourselves in a struggle when we hold a model in our minds of how the practice should be going. Try to be aware of resistance when it occurs and don't worry if the mind is racing. We are responsible for our efforts in practice, not the results of practice, because the results are beyond our control.

One exercise that you can try as a way of learning how to work with resistance is to sit through three instances of experiencing resistance. In other words, sit and apply your usual method of practice. When you want to get up, continue to sit and be aware of the experience of wanting to get up. Then continue with your method. When you experience wanting to get up for the second time, stay in the sitting posture and be aware of wanting to get up. Then continue with your method. After the third time of being aware of wanting to get up, get up. This is a way to learn how to be less intimidated by resistance.