The Grain of the Wood, by Thanissaro Bhikku

There are two sides to the path of practice: the side of developing and the side of letting go. And it's important that you see the practice in both perspectives, that your practice contains both sides. If you practice just letting go, you'll throw away the baby with the bath water. Everything good will get thrown out because you let go of everything and leave nothing left. On the other hand, if yours is just a practice of developing and working and doing, you miss the things that happen on their own, that happen when you do let go.

So an important part of the practice is realizing which is which. This is what discernment is all about, realizing which qualities in the mind are skillful, the ones that are our friends, and which qualities are unskillful, the ones that are your enemies. The ones that are your friends are those that help make your knowledge clearer, make you see things more clearly -- things like mindfulness, concentration and discernment, together with the qualities they depend on: virtue, morality, persistence. These are the good guys in the mind. These are the ones you have to nurture, the ones you have to work at. If you don't work at them, they won't come on their own.

Some people think that practice is simply a matter of letting the mind go with its own flow, but the flow of the mind tends to flow down, just as water flows downhill, which is why the mind needs to be trained. In training the mind, we're not creating the unconditioned or unfabricated in the mind. It's more like polishing wood. The grain is already there in the wood but, unless you polish it, it doesn't shimmer, it doesn't shine. You don't create the grain, but the polishing is what brings out the grain already there. If you don't polish it, it doesn't have the same shimmer, it doesn't have the same beauty it does when it's polished. [...]

This is why there has to be effort. This is why there has to be work in the practice.

--Thanissaro Bhikku