

## Effort

**Gil Fronsdal**

**2004-05-17**

So last week I talked about faith or trust or confidence, and I mentioned that it's the first of five factors, five faculties, which can be seen as the grammar of a meditation practice. This is the kind of stuff which often meditation teachers in Southeast Asia will use to measure how someone's doing in the meditation practice, to look at these five faculties, five potentials, these five capacities that we have, and see how they're coming into play in order to help with the meditation practice. If one of them is in balance, they'll try to bring it into balance. If one is lacking or one is too strong, they try to make an adjustment for it. These five capacities that we all have are: the capacity for confidence or trust as the first one; the second is the capacity for energy to make effort; the third is the capacity for noticing what's going on, that of mindfulness; the fourth is that of concentration, of stabilizing the mind, getting it concentrated, focused on what you want to pay attention to; and the fifth is discernment or wisdom, the capacity to be discerning about what our experience is in a way that's useful for the meditation practice.

It's been said that in all human endeavors, these five capacities, five faculties, in some way or other come into play with those endeavors. It doesn't have to be applied only to meditation practice. But the Buddha took these five and applied them to meditation practice, in order to help the particular endeavor, the particular activity of meditation practice. There is a classic teaching that these five are sequential, that they'll have to be. There's also a classic teaching that they all arise together and interplay with each other. But in the sequential model, you start with faith or confidence or trust, and with that, that gives you the inspiration then to want to apply effort, or inspiration to make effort.

So effort arises out of trust or confidence. That often happens in daily activities, that the more inspiration, more confidence you have in some endeavor, the more likely you are to put good effort, good energy, into it. So it's often very important then to have a good foundation of confidence, of trust, of faith for meditation practice. Today, what I want to do is talk a little about the second factor of energy in practice, the capacity, the faculty of energy. I find it, thinking about it today, that it's a difficult subject for me to talk about. I'm not sure exactly why.

Maybe for other people it's easy to talk about. The first time I taught a class on what's called the *Eightfold Path*, the classic Buddhist teachings of the Buddhist path, one of those eight aspects of the path is called right energy. So I did a series over many weeks, I don't know how many weeks, and I skipped right effort intentionally. I just didn't want it. I just somehow didn't want to touch it because I didn't quite know how to talk about it, or I didn't know how to relate to it in terms of talking.

I had made and I make a lot of effort in my meditation practice when I've been on retreat, sometimes a phenomenal amount of energy and effort in practice. So it's certainly something I love doing. The effort part, the energy part, the engagement part with practice is something which I have a tremendous love and appreciation for doing. Sometimes it's really fun, sometimes it's not. But, you know, it's something I really like doing, and it was odd that I didn't know how to talk about it. I couldn't find how to talk about it.

I feel like I'm still trying to find my way in talking about it. It seems like it may be an odd thing for me to say, since making effort or energy is, you know, pretty basic. If you must sit down to do a spiritual practice, you have to apply yourself. Someone gave me the analogy recently: you can go to the library or bookstore and get books on exercise, and you can stay home and read them, and read them, and read them, and that's very nice. I suppose they can be captivating, nice photos and stuff, but sooner or later you know you have to do it. You have to make the effort to actually apply yourself.

You might be getting good reading skills by reading that, but the exercise books are not usually about that. So sooner or later you go to the restaurant. You can't just study the mind. You have to order the food also. So effort is really central to this whole thing I'm trying to teach. I want to teach mindfulness, so it's a little bit embarrassing not to know exactly what it is or how to talk about it.

So with that as an introduction, we'll try here today. I'll say also that there are different words in the Pāli tradition, teachings of the Buddha, that overlap with each other, that belong to this general category of words meaning effort. There are words for effort, there's a word for energy, there is a word for endeavoring, there is a word that sometimes translates as persistence, there's a word for power. There are a lot of different words that fit into that category, and they have nuances of meaning, but they overlap quite a bit also. Sometimes when Buddhist teachers or texts talk, they slide into each other, the different meanings of it.

I want to give you one example from the discourses of the Buddha, a passage which is repeated at various places in his discourses, to give you a flavor of how important effort or en-

ergy is. You can find many other passages that are similar. A monk generates desire, strives, initiates strength, takes hold of his mind, and endeavors. That's a very energetic thing, it's kind of active, you know it. So generates desire—the word is *chanda* for those who want to know it. Some people think that Buddhists are not supposed to have desire.

But in the teachings of the Buddha, there are certain desires that the Buddha saw as being problematic, certain desires which lead to suffering, but there are other desires which are quite beneficial to have. They don't lead to suffering. They don't lead to delusion or an inappropriate way of living. In fact, certain kinds of desires are considered very wholesome and helpful for the spiritual path, and being able to differentiate between those two is a very important part of Buddhist practice. In order to apply effort in the spiritual life, there has to be a certain kind of desire, and so the practitioner generates a certain kind of desire, a certain kind of aspiration.

Maybe some people would like a certain kind of sense of purpose, a sense of dedication, a sense of, “You know, there's something that's really wanted here,” a kind of healthy sense of desire. Even if the desire is to have no desires at all, that's still a little vivid desire. Some people like to pursue that very energetically: “I'm going to sit here and have no desires at all,” and then they let go all desires except for that one, until that's the last one, and then they let go of that one. They wait until the last bit. An idea of striving is something also that is often not appreciated very much in some meditation circles, because striving will often give you a headache.

But striving is a word the Buddha seems to have used, and striving is not meant to be something that's headache-producing, or self-centered, or kind of pushy, or very willful. Striving, I think, means something you do with great zeal, great dedication, great enthusiasm: “Yes, I may do this. I'm really going to make an effort here, and really pursue this.” Then, in this translation, is “initiates strength.” The word is *virīya*, and initiates is a very strong kind of energy.

Arouses energy in order to then engage in this particular endeavor. In the discourse on the great and the four foundations of mindfulness, the Buddha talks similarly about making effort, and he uses the word that's translated into English as “ardent.” For those of you who know Sanskrit or Pāli, the word is *tapas*. *Tapas* sometimes has a feeling of fire or fiery energy, and so being ardent is the usual English translation—to be ardent in your practice. In ancient times, at least, there was a lot of effort, a lot of emphasis on making a lot of effort. The word *virīya*, which is the word used for energy, is a cognate to the word *vīra*, which means a hero

or warrior.

So the idea is to make heroic effort or to be like a warrior in your spiritual practice. Some of you might have met great practitioners like Pandita, or someone who really has the warrior approach to practice. I've noticed that at least among my colleagues, the vipassanā teachers at Spirit Rock and elsewhere, there's a phenomenon where the only ones who seem to talk about making a warrior-like effort in your practice are the women teachers. I'll leave that for you to sort through, but they're certainly in line with the way that the tradition talks about really putting your wholehearted effort into the practice. I would venture to say that there is no spiritual life without effort, without some kind of effort, some application, some engagement, something we do.

If you just, you know, were confusing, it is a phenomenon called bedside or nightstand Buddhists. As he notes, probably good, but it's like in an exercise book. So one aspect of this constellation of things called effort or energy is the energy factor itself. Energy is something which can vary from hour to hour, from day to day, from month to month, varied depending on many different things—our health, how busy we are. It can also vary based on psychological factors, our attitude.

When we feel discouraged by something, sometimes our energy drains out of us. Sometimes our energy can turn very quickly in one direction or the other. Suddenly, something really marvelous walks through the door, and suddenly you find yourself with all the energy needed. Or something really terrible happens. Or, you know, you get a phone call that says, "Can you please come in? We need someone to scrub the walls of my room on the outside, and you've been volunteered," and then maybe your energy drops.

I remember as a kid often having my energy level drop dramatically when I was asked to do certain things. Energy in the system is sometimes affected by psychology. It's also affected by our other activities. If we exercise a lot and keep our body in good shape, there's often a good energy that's available to us in the body, the system kind of coursing through us. Sometimes if we've overeaten, or we've just been staying up late, or just worn ourselves down, we don't have the physical energy, the vibration, the vitality that's available to apply in different directions.

So one of the aspects of energy in practice is its importance. It's very helpful to have good energy, good vitality, and so we take care of ourselves in all kinds of ways to have that in place. We get enough sleep. Americans are said to be a sleep-deprived culture. Some Americans need to sleep more than they need to meditate. Maybe some of you need to sleep more than

you need to meditate.

Some people need to exercise more. Some people are trying to have meditation help them in their lives, but they simply don't have good energy in their system to really get a lot of benefit from meditation, and they'd be better off doing some exercise first. Maybe that's all kinds of things, what that might mean. But they need to get the body back into balance, to have a good form of energy to help their meditation practice be successful, be useful. The Buddha didn't teach exercise programs. He didn't teach push-ups and sit-ups, or whatever.

But I think that if he lived in modern-day America, he'd probably have like a ninefold path, you know? Probably the ninth, or somewhere in there, would be right exercise. But the Buddha didn't need that, because he spent all his time walking—not all his time, but he walked a lot. He walked long distances. He walked every day. He did a lot of walking meditation.

I learned recently someone told me that Ajahn Mun, who is, as we know, one of the great exemplary monks of our time, monks who kind of started the whole lineage of true Buddhism, a very important meditative meditation master, spent a lot of his time meditating even as an accomplished master. Apparently, he spent something like—I'm not sure of the exact numbers now, so don't take me literally—but he spent something like twice or three times as much every day doing walking meditation as he did sitting meditation. If you do that much walking meditation, it kind of keeps your body in good shape. So to somehow ensure that you have a good foundation of energy in your system so you can come to meditate, you have that available to you. I've noticed a phenomenon which, again, may be anecdotal rather than real, but fifty, sixty, seventy years ago, there was a stronger tendency when people, when their backs were out, or people were sick or something, people had the attitude, "Oh, you have to kind of strengthen yourself, build yourself up," and then in my generation, when people's backs went out, the tendency was just to rest.

Now, this may characterize different generations or different approaches to different eras of our society. Some people focus, when things are not going well, when they're stressed out, or when they're feeling weak, on resting. But actually, what's better done sometimes is to build up strength, to be active. My wife had a shoulder injury for a while, and she would do a lot of different things, including resting it, and nothing helped until someone told her she had to exercise it, and that was kind of counterintuitive. So she exercised it, and that made all the difference for her.

Sometimes when we feel kind of drowsy and depressed and bad, the tendency is to rest and not do anything and lay really low. What's called for is to do something very active, to bring

the energy up in the system, so that the whole psychophysical system is a more useful instrument for us, certainly for meditation practice, and for many other things also. The energy that's available to us—there's a certain way in which energy feeds on itself, or grows on itself, develops with itself as we apply energy. Sometimes it also generates energy. I've seen that in meditation practice where I've been sleepy, or sleeping in meditation, or collapsing my posture, and I keep putting effort in, and at some point that effort begins to kick back, and the effort gets aroused and awakened and develops in a beautiful way.

That energy sometimes becomes crystalline or pure or beautiful, the effort or the energy that's available for practice. You can feel your whole body come alive. I wouldn't call it exactly relaxed, but I wouldn't call it tense. It's kind of energized in a wonderful, clear, restful way. I think that there are some people who associate meditation with becoming calm and relaxed, and sometimes they miss the value of meditation that goes beyond relaxation to developing a kind of alert energy. That is one of the most satisfying things I know, much more satisfying than being relaxed.

So there's energy that's important in meditation, and ensuring we have the right kind of energy. Then there's the issue of where we apply the energy. It's one thing to have energy. It's something else—what we do with that energy. That belongs to the category of effort, the kind of effort we make with that energy. The Buddha talks about four great efforts to make.

These, again, can be applied to any activity that we do. If you have something you want to pursue, there are four things you probably do without thinking, without thinking along these categories. First, maybe you're concerned with avoiding doing those things which get in the way of your purpose. Second, you try to avoid the appearance or the arising of things which could get in the way. Third, you try to maintain or support or enhance those things which are helping you with your purpose. Fourth, you try to arouse things which could help you in your endeavors but are not present right now.

To arouse those things—thus four—and in a very simple, simplified formula that's given, they are abandoning, preventing, supporting, and arousing. Those are the four kinds of efforts we saw. We try to abandon those things which get in the way. We try to prevent the arising of things which get in the way but haven't arisen. We try to support and enhance those things which are there, which are helpful, and we try to arouse those things which have not yet arisen but which could be really helpful for us.

So if the purpose we're engaged in is to wake up, to get concentrated, to practice mindfulness, those four efforts apply there also. We try to let go of those things which get in the way. We

might want to let go of a tendency to move our body a lot. Sometimes if you move your body a lot, fidget a lot in meditation, it's actually hard to develop a deep, stable, concentrated mind. So you let go of that because that seems to get in the way.

Or you notice that if you spend a lot of time thinking about certain things—say you're reviewing over and over again how you're going to get a patent on your wonderful invention of collapsible automobiles—people think about the most amazing inventions in meditation. So you have this wonderful idea. It's not a very useful train of thought to think about patents for collapsible cars unless, you know, I don't know what. So you learn, "Oh, that's not very useful. I'm trying to wake up and be present. I think I need to let go of this train of thought." If I keep following this train of thought, it's not conducive and helpful.

Certain attitudes are not very useful and helpful, and so we learn to let go of them. The process of letting go or abandoning can be a very wise part of any activity, but certainly of any spiritual activity. Knowing what to wisely let go of because it doesn't serve us, and then arousing things. Then trying to prevent things from arising that detract which have not yet arisen. You might have learned from experience that certain kinds of things that you do stand in your way.

For example, say you meditate in the morning and you really like meditating in the morning, but you also really like reading the newspaper, and so the newspaper wins out first, right? So you jump out of bed, all excited, you run out, get the newspaper, and it's like the best thing, right? You open it up, and you read the paper, and it's wonderful or not, and then you go meditate, and your mind is filled with images and ideas and thoughts and opinions and judgments, and maybe fear and anger and delight or whatever might be coming out of the newspaper. You notice that when your mind is filled by those images and impulses and reactions from a newspaper, it's very hard to sit down and get concentrated. So you know, "Oh, if I'm going to be a good meditator, I think I need to read the newspaper after I meditate, not before," to prevent the arising of things which get in the way of getting concentrated.

The third one, the effort to support things which are helpful—they are already here. I think that one of the things that's very helpful in spiritual life is to begin appreciating the good qualities, the good activities, the good mental states, the good attitudes, the good intentions that we already have. There's often a lot of goodness within us, a lot of helpful qualities here that we often overlook and don't appreciate deeply enough. I think human beings, at least the ones I know for the most part, seem to have an amazing capacity to be selective in their appreciation or their disdain or their criticalness. There can be ninety—like my son, my little

six-year-old son. He's going to suffer some in his life, I think, because he has this amazing ability to spend three or four hours on a play date, and even if he's having the time of his life running around, just everything, then near the end, usually at the end, as he's tired, something goes wrong.

The kids do something a little snide, or a little mean to each other, and he will latch on to that particular thing and forget the four hours earlier of having the time of his life. "Oh, that was a terrible play date," you know, those two minutes of a little fight they had over something. He knows it's very selective. I think what's helpful in a spiritual life is not to put blinders on things which are not working or things that are off, unwholesome or unskillful. But I think it's actually very helpful to develop a habit of appreciating that which is already here, which is beautiful, that is wonderful, that's already working.

My suggestion to you is, there is probably a lot more that's working, a lot more to appreciate than probably already that you're doing so far. So if you take that challenge of mine, you will just go and look into: What is it to be appreciated right here? Then support and enhance that which is already wonderful, what's happening here. If you notice that something could be helpful, and it's not here already, then arouse it. Cultivate it.

Sometimes when I sit down to meditate and my mind is not very concentrated, I decide the wisest thing for me to do is to sharpen up my concentration, to arouse it and bring it up so that I can have a more useful mind, so the mind can focus and look and be engaged in activity in a more useful way. Sometimes I'll do particular practices that arouse my concentration when it needs to be there. Sometimes I'll do practice that arouses loving-kindness, if I feel like more kindness would be good in the system. Sometimes I'll do practices to arouse my energy because I feel energy needs to be there. Sometimes I'll do practices which are more relaxing and calming if I feel tense or feel too energized or restless or something.

I'll do certain things which are relaxing because I think I need to arouse that factor, or to bring the body and mind into a certain kind of balance so that it's useful to engage in the practice of mindfulness or meditation. Those are called the four great efforts, and they apply to any activity, and they apply to spiritual life and to meditation practice. One of the reasons why I was hesitant talking about effort in the past is that I had the idea that effort, my idea of effort, in my definition of it, seemed to imply something about a self-centered effort, or manipulative effort, or effort to manufacture or create something in the future that was not part of what was already here. A huge part of my meditation practice over the decades that I've done it has been and continues to be practicing an acceptance of what is already here.



It's a non-acceptance of what's here which often causes a lot of suffering for people.

It's very radical to practice acceptance. You can pull the rug from underneath a lot of our difficulties in life if we just begin practicing acceptance. For me, given who I was, that was a very important practice—to practice unconditional acceptance of this moment here. So then I was confused between radical acceptance of this moment, being mindful of this moment as it actually is, and effort, which seemed like it didn't involve that kind of acceptance. It's like pushing or trying to make something happen.

However, when I try to practice this radical acceptance of the present moment, I used to practice it with great enthusiasm. I remember the story—sometimes I would become like on fire, like it was the most important, most passionate thing I had in my life to do was to sit down and totally, if I could completely and fully accept this moment just as it was, without trying to push it away, without trying to make it different, without trying to hold on to it, just as open, balanced, aware, just here. Maybe it sounds like a paradox to talk about making a kind of almost heroic effort to be totally accepting of this moment here. Sometimes, when my mind is really scattered, in order for me to be completely accepting of this moment here, I have to really work on my concentration. I have to really make strong efforts if my breath can't stay there.

The more distracted the mind is, the greater the counterforce is needed to work against that or to balance that sometimes. To really hold that mind feels like sometimes physical labor. It can't be there, be there, be there, either. That seems a little bit antithetical to the whole meditation process, to make kind of strong effort—is it all about being relaxed? But there are times when really strong effort is needed.

When I sat with a lot of physical discomfort in my meditation practice, the practice of radically accepting, unconditionally accepting the present moment with its pain required a tremendous effort to really apply myself to stay there, stay, or stay there, because the mind was so powerfully conditioned to recoil from that. It's the kind of work—"stay, stay, stay now." Effort. The other thing I was thinking about today about effort is sometimes in play, human beings apply a lot of effort. If you go to a playground and watch those kids, and then if you try to mimic the kids, follow right behind them and do exactly what they're doing, you would be wiped out very quickly. They're still saying, "Daddy, come!"

But play often has it, you know. We put a lot of effort—you may play volleyball or something, a lot of effort goes into it. Effort can be really fun. Effort is not something to be thought of as a problem, or an issue, as a hindrance, or something to hesitate to be engaged in. I

think the task in meditation, one of the tasks, is to make effort, to apply ourselves in a way that's healthy for meditation, is appropriate for meditation, and in a way that actually brings enjoyment and delight.

It brings us delight to sit down and engage in this activity. This is great, even when it's difficult. I really want to do this. Sometimes it can really feel like play. Meditation sometimes can be actually a lot of fun.

For example, everybody has their own little idiosyncratic ways of meditating, and so I won't tell you mine. You could do your own, no? I won't tell you—well, then I'll never live it down. For a while I used to do this like a pinball approach to meditation, you know, just mental noting and noting, noticing what's going on. The sound is imagined as playing pinballs, and that was fun, and it kept me very engaged, and helped me get concentrated.

At some point I had to let go of that, because that kind of activity with meditation can be fun in many different ways. Part of what's important with effort and energy is to monitor the energy and effort we're making, to ensure that it's the appropriate kind of effort given the overall ecology of where we are at that moment. It's kind of like an ecology of mind and body that's going on, and the energy has to match that or be a match for that. There are times when energy needs to be—the effort and energy is very strong and very powerful. At other times, the energy needs to be very relaxed and loose, maybe almost feeling no energy at all.

I think for people who live stressed out lives, sometimes it's best not to make too much effort. Maybe sometimes it's better to make no effort at all, and just sit back and just relax. In my own meditation practice, I find it's very helpful for me to make mostly non-effort in the beginning of a meditation session, just kind of just be there. Practice just being, letting go, and letting go of the tendency of the mind to wander, and just not doing any sitting, being very relaxed, and almost not making any effort at all, and letting the distractions of the day kind of settle on their own. Just let things settle on their own.

Don't engage, don't try to do anything, just try to be very still. Then at some point, after I've gotten quiet and calm enough, then it's a different kind of effort and energy that's made. Sometimes it can be quite strong, sometimes it can be quite steady, sometimes it can be quite sweet. But it is important to monitor the energy or the effort we're making. So it's not too tight, not too pushing or too hard, but also not too complacent, not too loose.

One of the traps of certain kinds of meditation practices that focus on radical acceptance of the present moment, or just being, or like *shikantaza* or things like that, is a complacency—

just going on, like everything's OK, just the way it is. "I'll just sit here. Everything's okay. Eating's fine. Everything's fine. Evening's wonderful." It's fine to sleep, you know, it's wonderful, but it's not really meditation practice.

So that kind of complacent effort and energy is not very useful. You don't want an effort that's too complacent. You don't want an effort that's too tight or too pushing. What actually happens in practice is often a balancing, a finding the way, kind of trying a little bit, trying a bit harder, and, "Oh, that was a little too much. I tried too hard now," and I ease it back up. "Oh, now I backed up too much," like a little—it's like a pendulum that swings.

You'll never actually—very seldom—get to a place where you feel like right in the middle, because if you and the environment never changed, then maybe you could find the middle after a while. But actually, you are always changing, and the situation is always changing, and so the effort and energy that's needed is in harmony with the overall ecology of the situation. So you're always going to be this little bit of swinging back and forth. Sometimes the swings are really big. Sometimes we make big mistakes in meditation practice, and I've got a headache sometimes from making the wrong kind of effort.

Sometimes I spend a long period of time sleeping. When I was a Zen center, there was a period when I just slept and slept and slept, bobbing back and forth, and I still bob, but not as much as I did. Effort, energy, is a hard thing to talk about, even though I've gone on and on now. I hope that that kind of aroused some interest in you at least to investigate, to study it, to engage in it, to think about it more seriously, to look and appreciate its role and its place in your spiritual practice. I didn't add one more thing I want to say.

One of the ways the word *viriyā* is sometimes translated into English is as persistence, and one of the keys of making energy in a spiritual life is to practice persistence, continuity, regularity. Persistence, constancy of practice, is what tends to bring the greatest fruit over time, no matter what the practice is. The analogy that's used in the tradition is: If you want to make fire by rubbing sticks together, you don't rub the sticks together for a couple of minutes, and then go get tea, and then come back, and pick it up, and rub it for another minute, and then go for tea, and then put them down, and then take a nap and come back. You know, it just doesn't work. You don't build up enough heat to get the spark.

So you have to be persistent and constant, keep going. The same thing with this inner energy, this inner fire, that you need to have a constancy and persistence in the effort you make. Sometimes that means persistence over a period of meditation. If you sit for forty minutes, you just kind of be really persistent in that forty minutes or on retreat. People who practice

on a daily basis—it's really helpful to have regularity. That persistence takes the form, "I sit every day, every morning," or "every day I sit." That regularity over time is very supportive of the overall energy and effort and development of a good quality of it for the well-being of our meditative life.