

2005-12-04 Right Effort Maintaining Wholesome States

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SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

These, this is the last week where I am talking about right effort and right effort is the second fifth, right? Yeah, the sixth, sixth step in the Eightfold Path. And it is a very important topic for Buddhists for variety of reasons. And, and one of them One reason is that the Buddha said, The Buddha only points the way it's up to you to make the effort. So there's the effort involved in practice. And there's another quote that was quite, quite a for me, very powerful quote, by that from the Buddha. He said, the Dharma is for the industrious. Not for the lazy. I'm not sure With a poly for industry assistance, they have industry back then. But the Dharma is for the industrious, not for the lazy. So here the importance of effort is important to you and applying oneself of engagement. And if you just kind of sit back and are lazy, nothing will happen. The Dharma Buddha's only point away so for us make effort. And part of the reason for that is the Dharma is something each of us needs to discover for ourselves. It's not something that's discovered, you can read books and learn some of the principles of Dharma and books, for example, and teachings. But it's not a matter of understanding the principles. But it's a matter of in the sense of self discovery, discovery, how these principles apply in our own lives, and only we can discover that and we discovered that by making some kind of effort, so we have to make effort. And the question is, what kind of efforts do we make And there's a there's a, in the, in the first discourse in this Samyutta Nikaya, one of the great collections of the Buddhist discourses, there's someone asks the Buddha, about how do you cross the flood, the flood is, is used to represent the floods of delusion to floods of greed, hate and delusion. The floods have kind of drowned people in suffering. So how do you cross the flood? And the Buddha said, not by standing still and not by striving to get across the flood. And so the person asked for clarification, what does that mean? And the Buddha says, If you stand still, you'll drown. And if you strive if you struggle, you'll be swept away. By the flood. So what's the alternative between stopping or halting? and striving, striving and straining? So and so one of the ways of seeing that is it's some kind of balanced effort, some kind of effort, which doesn't have strain in it, but also not holding back and resistant, reluctant to make an application just

waiting. If you sit and wait long enough, you know, something will happen. I just said NATO says, if, if sitting was where was that just have to sit long enough. Chickens would be in like. So there has to be some, you know, some kind of engagement. And some of you maybe had experience of doing something like hiking, hiking in the mountains, maybe going for a long hike, maybe even going backpacking for many days. And perhaps the effort that's made initially appealed, you know, bodies, not thinking it's kind of a struggle, kind of get to make strong effort. But at some point you get going, body gets conditioned well enough and you get into flow of it. And, and you can actually carry on a fairly nice pace. good pace, not vigorous, it's not lazy. It's not held back and feels for a while, at least, we could be a few hours depending on how many hike, it could feel quite like unflow like rhythm that can ease and it feels appropriate. The energy that is vigorous there, you don't feel like you're pushing, but there's a good pace going on. And I suspect that a lot of endeavors that are repetitive nature, when you engage in getting a get into it after a while you can get into a kind of a flow or rhythm or there's a lot of energy, it can be expended. So I get to go backpacking and you're really in on the trail and really kind of chugging along. There's a lot of energy being expended. But you might say that there's no efforts being expended in a funny way, in the sense that they energies there but you kind of bodies in this rhythm. It's just kind of you're being carried along by the effort by the momentum has been created. And there isn't that kind of mental will willing, that maybe had to happen at the beginning of the trail when you were knocking conditioned or not warmed up. There's no will anymore that kind of effort. Exactly. So the same thing can happen with Dharma practice. In Dharma practice. Sometimes when people start practicing, there can be you know, it's a pill, a pill, it's difficult to get going. I'm going to sit every day, this meditation seems really great to me every day, and we sit the first day and then about two months later, remember why am I not supposed to sit every day? I think now I'm going really going to try to two days and months goes by you know, something, it's gonna have to be really hard to get going for some people or even sit in sitting if person does sit every day. Even then it can be hard to get going. The mind wanders away, mind wanders away and You find yourself kind of, it's very easy to be lazy in meditation, and not really engaged. And so, or it's possible to bear down and strive in some way, which is not helpful either. So how do you get to that place where you can have a good ongoing engagement in the practice you might be doing?

So

effort is important. And effort is really important in the teachings of the Buddha, much more so than you sometimes will pick up for me, maybe. Or sometimes other Western teachers, where sometimes there's a kind of emphasis on acceptance or being at ease, resting in the natural ease of the mind and just let things happen by themselves and all that. And it seems, you know, it's kind of like a easygoing approach to spiritual life. I'd like to read from the teachings of the Buddha when he talks about right effort. And somebody those of you been here now know that really well, the four right efforts in defining right effort, the Buddha defined it as being four kinds of appropriate effort and the kind of overall principles. If you have a goal in mind, if you have a purpose in mind, then there are four efforts you should make to attain that goal. And one effort is you should avoid doing those things that get in the way of your goal. You should if you're doing something gets in the way of your goal, you just stop

doing it. You should do those things, which help you get to your goal. And you should maintain and continue doing those things which support you moving to that goal, that direction or that orientation. And those are the four efforts that was supposed to fly in all kinds of endeavors. Even when you drive here in the morning to get to IMC or wherever you're going to drive next. You need to have some sense of the four right efforts right? If you're in San Jose, and you start driving down to Santa Cruz, but really want to come here, Redwood City, you making the wrong effort, direction you're going along, you know, it's not helping you need to kind of stop going in that direction, turn around coming other direction. And then you have to maintain, you know, it's one thing to set yourself on one on one going north from San Jose, say, I'm heading there to IMC and then say, Well, you know, you know, I think I just stopped along the side of the freeway. newspaper, you never get here you have to maintain the effort you're going. So it is a four right efforts supposed to apply to all kinds of areas of inner inner life. Now applying it to our Dharma practice. The Buddha had this to say this is the kind of the traditional way of describing the four right efforts. The first one has to do about letting go stopping doing those things that get in the way. They're half those things you're doing. They're getting in the way. Here, a big coup among awakened awakens zeal. zeal, that's a strong word right? awakened zeal for the non arising unreason. unskillful states. That just means stop doing things that get in the way. Stop, don't do those things which are going to get in the way. So thanks. are not happening yet. Avoid letting them happen.

So,

and then make zeal for the non arising of unresolved unskillful states and the Bhiku makes effort arouses energy exerts his or her mind and strives. That's a lot of energy. Yeah. This is not for lazy right, apply yourself to become awakened zeal for the abandoning of unskillful have arisen unskillful states and next effort, arouses energy exerts the mind and strives to become awakened zeal for the rise. In the wicked, wicked zeal for the rising of unreason, skillful states Makes effort arouses energy exerts the mind and strives to become awakened zeal for the continuance, non disappearance, strengthening, increase and fulfillment by development of arisen skillful states and makes effort arouses energy exerts the mind and strives. This is called right. To a lot of effort, exhausting. And for people who already living exhausting lives, you know, struggling and straining, they come to meditation because it's supposed to be the antidote. Here the faceless that they keep basically saying Nick strong efforts. What you have to do know is that the appropriate effort for any person has to do with their condition with their situation in life. And when people are stressed out, the appropriate effort might be to relax And do that relax in and have zeal relaxation can be a skillful state. So you should have zeal for relaxing, make effort, arouse energy, exert your mind and strive to relax well. You can do that. And you can be very diligent to the mind to keep the mind relaxed or to keep the keep your you're not get caught, I get stressed by what goes on within you. Very, very diligent in staying open and spacious. Being open, spacious doesn't mean you don't make effort. And so there's a kind of a natural corrective, you know, you're not supposed to make this kind of effort, strong African meditation. So you feel even more exhausted in your from your daily life. But you need to make some effort. And a very diligent effort can be if you're stressed, very diligent like Africa be to relax until you're relaxed enough.

Once you relaxed enough, then you might want to think about doing other things with the meditation practice rather than just relaxing. Relaxing is a dead end path. It's pretty wonderful to be relaxed. But if that's all your meditation is you can be like a chicken you know, it's pretty good, but it's not going to go all the way. So in the in the discussion last week, what discussion last week was to cultivate one of these you can do is cultivate skillful states. One of the skillful states is mindfulness. It's considered to be one of the Supreme the skillful states to cultivate, being mindful of what's happening in the present moment. And for some people, mindfulness can be seen as as a call, to not do anything about what's happening in your experience, but simply be aware of it. Just know. Be aware of what's happening right now. But It's wonderful to do that. Just be not before against anything, not anything like that or change your experience, but to cultivate the ability to be present in a kind of clear way for what's happening. Have that equanimity of mind to be able to do that. But even then, the bigger awakens, zeal for mindfulness, it makes effort arouses energy exerts the mind and strives for that kind of nonreactive presence of nonreactive awareness. You know, I've had a certain experience of saying, I'm gonna sit here and be mindful presence for what is allow whatever it is here to be what here I'm not gonna be for or against it. I'm just gonna feel it, experience it just be fully present. And then I wake up five minutes later that was because there wasn't that there wasn't the energy. The engagement in that practice says I was kind of complacent. You know, wandering around. And I think it's sooner or later for a lot of people that practice. complacency can be a hindrance in men, especially, especially meditation practice. And it was a hindrance for me for longer than I care to admit. I was able to get fairly comfortable and calm. In my meditation, it was very pleasant to sit. And in that enjoyment of my sitting in that calm and settle state, I just kind of started just kind of allowed myself to sleep. Everything's fine, thank you. Everything's fine. It's wonderful, you know, so wonderful to be here. And I just fall asleep. And I needed to learn that too, to be awake, to be really engaged, isn't it also, engagement has to be kind of an engagement. Sometimes has to be an application of effort. But once it gets going, it can be like backpacking or hiking. It's there it's naturally flowing presence. So in the third step of these four, four right efforts, it's cultivating wholesome or skillful states and one of them is mindfulness. There are six others, which are sometimes mentioned as being very important, and they are important. And that is, with mindfulness, the other of the seven factors of awakening. And that is what mindfulness practice involves cultivating and developing in some way, either actively or passively, because often these kind of come in the wake of strong mindfulness, somewhat allowing for the development of mindfulness, investigation, efforts or energy,

joy,

tranquility, concentration, and equanimity. Seven factors some people Say the seven factors of awakening is the sap that runs through the tree of awakening the sap that runs through the blood that runs through the sustains awakening practice. And these seven factors of awakening will slowly over time, develop in people's mindfulness practice gets stronger. One of the places where they develop the most strongly is on retreat. And sometimes it takes sometimes a long retreat, especially people who are new to really get the sap flying strongly. So they really become strongly part of who we are the seven factors. But I think even practicing every day, you know, practicing mindfulness practicing

effort, slowly, even in subtle ways, hopefully these seven some of these seven factors of awakening, awakening begin showing they're showing themselves to you. You begin feeling like you have momentum and mindfulness tend to wake up more often or pay attention more often are interested in paying attention more often. As you go through your day. And your capacity it will be breathing. After being present, it gets more and more clear. You learn how to be present without the filters of judgments for example. And then over time, you'll learn that your capacity investigation gets interesting, gets more flexible, more presence. So for a silly example, but in the middle of last night, my kids woke up and one of them woke up with a cough and needed attention and then woke up for it sometimes you don't know how to wake up, and they need attention. And was cold, got out of bed and took care of the kids. And with especially if it was so cold in her house, I went back into bed and I was really awake. Two o'clock 230 at night and so I couldn't go back to sleep right away and I didn't want Get up and sift because it's so cold. And so just lay there in bed. And but pretty quickly, what I started doing was investigating what's going on here. What's happening here. I'm laying here. What is very interesting to watch the mind use my mind is interesting to watch. And, and I noticed that you know, as I often do, if I'm awake in the middle of the night like that, I have some thoughts passed in my mind. I was, Oh, no, I get it nice. I'm gonna cope. I'm so tired to one morning, give a talk. And this is not good. And little bit I could investigate and look at those thoughts go through, I can actually feel that they are in some subtle way they were they were toxic to me. You know, they kind of depress me and kind of didn't make you feel make me feel good to me. And I thought, you know, that's kind of why do I do that? And then I thought maybe maybe we listen make other kinds of thoughts, skillful thoughts, the arising of skillful states. And it's our thinking it's really nice here it's warm in my bed, lucky to have a house like all these wonderful things, you know, and, and actually nothing nothing is no problem right now say I could feel how the toxic quality of the earlier thoughts went away and I was feeling kind of happier from that. And those investigators they've been when I say here was an interest investigate what was going on was close at hand. And I just right away start investigating what's happening here. And there was what was also interesting is after a while, kind of shifting from kind of these more downer kind of thoughts to more upper kind of thoughts, is tiring to make the effort to think this way, even good thoughts. You know, it was nice work before while I did it, but now it's getting kind of old or tired. So I think I'll just be awake. Just be here. Just present and hear, clear, relaxed way to be present. Just be And pretty soon after just doing that, and then I woke up about two hours later I fell asleep. So this investigation is important. So to have a habit of it becomes something becomes more part of our life, to meet interested investigators. And then to make effort you know, effort becomes something becomes more second nature it easier to do. The more we make effort, the easier it is to make effort. Right effort. And then hopefully, there's a beginning of some kind of joy, some feeling of being lighter, or delighted, delighted, lighter. from, from the practice you're doing from your state, your quality of your being gets more improved, lighter and happier. And that's a really wonderful thing. It's appropriate as appropriate. But in Buddhist spirituality Buddha's Dharma life itself. Sooner or later, you're expected to feel some joy in the practice from the practice some joy In life, without it, it's very hard to go further and practice. And then tranquility. So ability to be calm, relaxed, tranquil, is a very important quality to cultivate and develop that happens. Maybe you feel some degree of comment because you sit in the morning, and little bit goes day morning just said, that calm carries with you the

rest of the day, part of the day. And then there's the ability to be concentrated, the mind starts getting stabilized. And so you might not scattered, jumping all over the place and running around and anxious about things but you're doing something, you have some stability, you're really here for this thing. You're present. And you really feel like you're here in yourself, rather than spinning your thoughts, to stability develops over time concentration, and then a capacity for equanimity hopefully develops over time. Some equanimity, meaning Firstly, that you're not so likely to react to what happens when something good happens or bad happens. You're not going to be caught by reactivity. And that becomes a skill capacity you develop over time by practicing. And so those are seven factors of awakening. Those will get cultivated. Now in the fourth of the four right efforts, the practices to maintain what has the skillful states that have arisen to maintain them. And I think this is really important, because it's possible to engage in a spiritual life in a dharmic life. And start having some nice things happening in our practice, and then stop practicing and those nice things fade away. Everything we say in Buddhism, everything is impermanent. So even the seven factors of awakening and permanent and permanent, your strength of your mindfulness, your strength of your ability to be present to some degree, your strength or your your ability to investigate Make effort to be happy to be tranquil, to be concentrated to be economists. All those are impermanent things. And they come in and go to some degree. It's natural, completely appropriate. Concentration, for example, has a lifetime. So if I sit down at times when I can get concentrated, I know that if I sit long enough, that concentration will go, its natural, sooner or later will go, the more concentrated I am, the longer I can keep that concentration. But sooner or later will go. And I can't tell you how many times on retreat I have suffered. Because the concentration went away. You know, rather than like, well, it has this lifetime, it's, you know, why should I suffer about something, you know, you suffer because you know, the seasons change? Some people do with you, you're expected this change, you know, that's natural. So the seasons change in the mind. Sometimes it's concentration, sometimes there's not, and you kind of ride the waves of if you learn how to surf. So you were surfing when it's too And then it goes away and something else and then it comes back some other time. But it isn't just but as as we practice the ability get concentrated becomes stronger and stronger, it comes back more often. And it becomes more of a regular thing. But unless you maintain practice, it will fade away. So it's very important to maintain, keep the practice going. So your skills and your mental states the good qualities, your inner strengths can be sustained. To develop strong concentration and then not practice concentration anymore. You'll lose that capacity to some degree. So I love the analogy that Buddha gave of starting a fire by rubbing sticks together. You take two sticks. I've never tried this, but this is supposed to be possible. Maybe Boy Scouts benefit Girl Scouts and Dennis, anybody done this over from sticks together make a fire. You've done it, did you succeed? made smoke? You've done it. So it's possible. And so right so the Buddha said that to you, you said his house analogy that always analogies about the right kinds of you have wet sticks. You can't do it. And so you can't you know, so that the analogy is wet to hear if you're full of doing evil things, you know, lying and stealing. You know, whenever, then it's like you really wet and you can't really get a spark. So you have to dry yourself out first. But then finally you get good dry sticks, even the best sticks around and you start, you know, rubbing them. You have them for a while it's a great time for tea. You put them down and you go get some tea and then you come back from tea. 10 minutes later. narrow lane, you pick up the sticks, and you start again.

Oh, no, I need to put them down. And it's all you come back and your revenue is always good things to do. your freezer needs to be defrosted or you know, or you have to make those important phone calls or emails to deal with or it's always things that can be done. And, and so you never build up enough friction of heat to make a spark, make smoke even. So, the same thing with Dharma practice, that if what you want to do is cultivate and develop your capacities, you can't expect those capacities to be developed by intermittent practice. There has to be some continuity in practice, over time. And so daily practices often strongly stress stressed practice every day. Some people like to go on retreats, and so to go on retreats, often not so some some sense of continuity. That happens. For some people. It's maybe even just once Once a year, I'm going to go on retreat. And for some people once a year, gives enough some kind of continuity of being on retreat. Some people like to do it more often. Or there's other kind of practices like a practice of generosity. What I said is very important, skillful state to develop is your capacity for generosity. And you cultivate generosity by practicing it, and it can get kind of rusty if you don't practice it. So if you're inspired by this kind development, then you keep it going. So there's a whole variety of things that in dharmic life you cultivate and develop or get around or develop as you go along. And continuity and regularity is very important for playing and develop, but also for maintaining them, keeping them going And I probably can't underscore enough from my own experience, how important it is to maintain the good qualities they're developing in practice their strength of mindfulness, strength of concentration, to develop it, and to safeguard and to recognize, okay, recognize that something's happening here. Now, some people when they practice mindfulness practice, think that nothing's supposed to happen. It's supposed to be present for what it is. And that luminous presence for what it is, is just, it's just a wonderful spiritual state and wonderful experience, spiritual experience, it can be but I would argue or say, that even the practice that full presence for what is just being present, what is will bring along with it, some of the factors of awakening with time, some of the other qualities of the mind it will develop and cultivate with that it can't not do that. And then he started recognizing joy, recognizing tranquility, recognizing equanimity Then honoring, respected, nourish it, support it, protect it. Keep it going. Don't blow it. It's so easy to blow things. So easy to blow. These good qualities are developing. What comes to mind right now is like on retreats, you're going along, you're developing some concentration, some stability, some calm, all these things are developed and then retreat. And these silent retreats we teach and then it seems completely innocent. to just go over to your, you know, your friend who's on retreat to and just you know, ask your friend how's it going with your retreat? Innocent you know, it's like you feel kind of free and easy. Your freedom and easiness you know, it's like, oh, I can express it in conversation. And you go over and talk to your friend and you talk for a while and you talk and you're getting Notice you're getting a mesh and cosmic conversation. Finally, half an hour later, an hour later, you go back into your silence. And you just exhausted the mind all the clarity of the mind or the energy that created in mind. It's just been dissipated, drained away. I never once I sat before months performance on retreats in silence, except we're talking to the meditation teacher for interviews, I didn't talk to anyone for four months. And then after four months, I said, Well, you know, I'll just talk to this guy, he's in the room near me. For some reason I forget why. And now he found me. I just decided after four months to

to clean my room.

You know, I was in intensive retreats, so you try not to do anything else but meditate. So I thought it'd be good to and so here's this other American. You saw me Trying to, you know, taking a little bit of time off to clean the room, tidy it up a little bit, you go out to go talk to Gil. So he talked to me, and I let him talk to me and we talked for half an hour. And after the half an hour talk, I had to take a nap. Because it just really wiped out it drained me so much. Because of the rarefied air very still state of mind that I attained. I kind of just blown away with this conversation. And so it's it'll be it'll be very wise about guarding and safeguarding states of mind because you don't want to be attached. You don't want to be clinging to it. You don't want to be kind of holding off the world in some unrealistic, unhelpful way. But there's a lot of a lot of things activities that we do, that are draining that drain us in environments where we feel like the environments kind of drain us of our energy or well being, you could stay sweet develop and there is a real, there can be a realistic and helpful way of choosing Carefully what we do the environments we go to even the people we hang out with, so that we can try to maintain the good qualities they're beginning to kind of show themselves a little bit. Okay, let's support this. Let's keep this going. So one of the beautiful things about energy or effort, application engagement in practice is that it's an art form. It's an art and that we always kind of finding our way in it. And it's always changes a little bit depending on conditions and we have to be interested in the call topic of energy and effort and what's appropriate different times, when to make a lot of effort went to hold back and let things happen more and just finding our way And the other thing is wonderful is that if you have a modest goal for your Dharma practice, then a modest amount of energy is enough. If you have a middling goal, then you'll need a middling amount of effort. And if you have you know the ultimate goal, then you need to have some kind of ultimate effort, some great effort. If a great goal then great efforts needed, even if the greatest effort is the great effort to totally completely get out of your way. Get out of your own way, completely, thoroughly, give up surrender, let go. All the different attachments, momentum, desires and wants of the mind and just be here for this life as it is so we have a few minutes. Do you have any comments or questions about this clarification as you'd like? Yes, rainbow. Please rainbow. Rainbow. I've heard you say something several times

over the years that has has puzzled me. I don't understand how it is possible

to exert right effort to avoid unwholesome states from arising. Well, you kind of meet a variety of things. What this means one is you plan ahead. So if you know that, for example, that reading the newspaper every day that you see those adverts ties mints. And, you know, you feel like you know, you can't live without lipstick. And you get completely a tizzy about lipstick, or whatever, you know. And, you know, you realize after, you know, a month of doing this, you know, this is not useful to be in a tizzy about lipstick every time I open newspaper. So I think I'm not going to read the newspaper, or I'm gonna figure another way to do it, or get a different newspaper that doesn't have lipstick, guys, you know, so it's avoiding, you see it, you know, you know, you have a tendency you see this to happen over and over again. And you say, Okay, I'm going to try to avoid the behavior. So this doesn't arise again. To make sense, that's one thing. And the other is, is a practice of what's called, I like to call

safeguarding ourselves at the sense doors. So you go into you drive by a, a automobile dealership and you see a brand new car so you see it and you stay very attentive at the experience of seeing. So you can leave it at that. As opposed to Am I gonna get that and I should sell him on how much they give me from this car and, and the whole greeting kind of builds it up. So it means staying really attentive. So you stay there and you can catch and notice the first beginning of arising of something. So you don't you don't take the bait. You might have the thought might arise. I think I'd like a new car. That's the bait if you don't take the bait, and that's also considered avoiding the arising of unreason. unskillful states those two ways Peter

I'm really glad that Peters

I'm really glad that

you read today for that particular passage

about striving in because

strong striving today, I think in our, in our everyday language he has taken on a negative meaning. And it's a favorite word of mine. to, to say that I'm going to try to sit today is different from saying I'm going to strive to sit today in the sense that if I'm trying to do something, then I'm in the trying, I'm not in the doing and striving is to do something to actually do something. And when that falls away when the when the efforts somehow weakened And I fall from doing it, then I do it again, that's striving. And it's a really

wholesome activity.

Striving without any straining, baby, striving not to strive. Seriously anything really, if you feel like striving or straining or grasping or it gets in the way of your practice, which many people does, then that can be a very wonderful striving not to strive for a while. In any way, there's so many different ways of engaging in practice. And again, as I said, it's the mindfulness the art of effort is an art. And there's no one right formula for how to make effort in meditation practice or in Dharma practice, and in different circumstances, different times for different people. Different kinds of efforts are required and needed. And, and so part of the art of practice is know how to, you know how to monitor yourself well enough to know what's needed in different circumstances and times. And hopefully in the process, enjoying it, really enjoying. It's really enjoyable effort. Engagement activity can be really enjoyable, like when you go hiking, and you really get into the flow of it really enjoyable to walk and hike, or do some other activity. And I really hope that all of you who might engage in a practice like this, that will find some way to find satisfaction from whatever effort you're making. Thank you very much.