

2011-01-09 Perfection of Effort

Tue, 8/18 10:31AM • 39:19

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

effort, people, buddhism, buddha, life, person, heroic effort, relaxed, important, buddhist path, making, meditate, practice, hard, suffering, big, walking, stressed, world, image

SPEAKERS

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This morning, I'd like to talk about the perfection of effort. It's the fifth of the 10 perfections, that are talking Buddhism and perfection is a very lofty term. But there are 10 qualities of character that can be developed and strengthened. And as they become strengthened, they support the practice of meditation, the practice of Buddhism. And what's beautiful about these is that it said that they these 10 qualities, support give fuel or give strength to both the cultivation of both the path to liberation and the path to compassion. Both our ability to become compassionate service to others are supported by these things. And so is our power path to freedom from suffering. The And, and so there are these 10 and they are generous starts with generosity as it does in many times in Buddhism that so many opportunities with the Buddha had to teach about the beginning of a list of beginning of practice or beginning of a path. He begins with the importance of generosity like the foundation, and then following that, as foundational is the important of ethical integrity or virtue. And there's going to be no liberation and no real compassionate service to the world without having some strong sense of ethical integrity and virtue with one opinion oneself. And then the character trait of being able to let go is considered very helpful. And then there's wisdom to develop a wise understanding and then there's a factor for today. Which is effort or energy. And when a person applies effort and energy, it's good to be patient. And so that's the sixth, that's the sixth one. The next time next month, I'll talk about that. And then and then after that comes truthfulness, the ability to be truthful is important, both for liberation and for compassion. And then the ability to be resolved to, to have determination is also very important quality. And then loving kindness is the ninth, and equanimity, the 10th. So today is perfection of effort. I think it's a beautiful quality. Though some people when they encounter Buddha, this idea of making efforts that Buddhism talks about, they're already exhausted. And it just seems like too much. I mean, they came to Buddhism for stress reduction, not to make effort and, and also When a people hear effort, it ties in with all kinds of ideas associations people have with making effort that gets in the way of making a wholesome or healthy effort. So there could be ideas of success and failure expectations, ideas that we have that I'm you know, I can't make that effort is hard and until something is difficult that I can't do anything difficult. Especially we talk about spiritual practice and I'm not going to be Buddha or Christ or something like that. I'm just making effort that's here they go again, these Buddhists you know, just telling me you know what, I should do something telling me that I'm not good enough the way I am. And I have to somehow change myself, I'm making effort. And it's not uncommon for people to complain to me that these Buddhism just you know, Buddhism doesn't seem to accept me the way I am. I want to be accepted the way I am. And that's okay. I suppose, but depending depending how you are.

There's a very famous quote of Suzuki Roshi that goes, he apparently told this to someone or at least supposed to have said, told someone, he said to her, you're perfect just the way you are. And then he was a long pause. And there's room for improvement. And there's something very profound about holding both of those together. But there is no Buddhism without some kind of effort. Because if it's just

a matter of accepting you as you are, and how you are as you're suffering a lot, so the idea is to accept yourself. I'm just here to accept my suffering. I'm here in this world to accept things as they completely are. And so I'm just neurotically suffering. So I just continue doing so. And that's what Buddhism has to teach. It's not that way at all. Buddhism does involve a change, changing something changing business as usual. And so that in order for things to change, we have to make some effort. We have to there are some choice do things differently than how we did it in the past. So if, if a person is driven by ambition and greed, and they're working 80 hours a week, they're stressed out. They're taking, they're cheating. They're taking advantage of other people because they're just trying to get money and get further advancing. And they're kind of their families falling apart. You don't tell them accept things as they are without some subtle explanation of that this means that something different than just kind of continue his business as usual. There has to be some change involved. And otherwise, there's no hope for that person. You know, you don't want you don't want to more warmonger to just continue. Fighting war come to Buddhism is I'll accept things as they are and let's continue fighting the war. That doesn't work. So well there has to be some change. So what's the change that's being asked of us in Buddhism. And the changes that's being asked is to change your life make a decision or life to switch our life away from living those ways that cause suffering, that add suffering, both to ourselves and to others. And that intention to live a life that doesn't cause suffering is a beautiful intention. That itself doesn't involve any action or effort. But it's a beautiful wishes an aspiration, that I think that I hope that exists in every heart, that once we get sensitive to the suffering in the world, that the hearts for heartfelt wishes to try to make a difference and alleviate come to an end bring to an end, suffering in ourselves and suffering around us. And so it entails making some choice then if you want to act on that intention, some choice to do things differently the business as usual, and how different than it has to be does and this is where I'm fond of this can be very different. It could be that it could be very quite dramatic the difference between night and day, and some people hear Buddhism and they read it right away, they changed their life dramatically. I've know people who've given up their job and gone off and become monastics, that's a pretty big, you know, to make that change. And those people who haven't changed much, but, but just a little bit, maybe they started sitting every day for 20 minutes. Or they just started paying attention to their speech and tried to speak and with more integrity, he's had conversations with people. Maybe these are considered relatively small compared to becoming a monastic. But there are changes that people make.

And so I'm fond of this analogy of, you know, two parallel lines will never meet, unless you take one of them. And you take one of them, and well, they never meet. But if you take one of them and nudge it a little bit away from the other, just a teeny bit, maybe imperceptibly at first, then because of that, they're heading slightly different directions. Over time, as the line goes further, the further out, they veer away from each other. And we think give enough time the distance becomes immense. And so if we are on a particular trajectory in our life, and we nudge it, not your life, too little bit to the right a little bit to the left, but sustain that new trajectory. Then over over time, the difference becomes big. Though it might not seem so big the first week, the first month or even the first year, but over five years a difference could be huge. The five years of difference between practicing ethical speech, could be huge compared to not doing so. meditating half an hour, every day. over five years could be huge difference in your life. Maybe the first days difference is not that great. And it's hard sometimes to have faith that these small steps can make a difference. But they can make a difference over time. Some people I know, like I have done complain and say, well, five years. I mean, that's, you know, that's so far in the future, you know, I can't think that far in the future and plan that plan ahead, you know, my spiritual life five years from now. And then I look back and five years in the past, but yesterday, it went so fast. And when I think of that, and I think Well, yes, it's worthwhile, then to kind of make a difference here. Some people make small differences in their life. That's what they can do or want to do. Move that line through that directory a little bit, and some people move it in big ways. Why is it different for different people? There's many, many factors involved. Sometimes the people who make the big difference are the ones

who suffer the most And it's been pointed out that some of the great religious figures in history lost a parent. When they were children. The Buddha's mother died when he was seven days old. And there's other people as well, the famous Zen master Dogen, his mother died, I think it when he was seven, eight or something. And so that's that's a, you know, big impact on young psyche. And so sometimes when the suffering is great, people, I have to do something, nothing else makes sense. And so they sometimes people make big changes. That's one reason why there can be a difference. Some people find that they have responsibilities in their lives that they're committed to. And it's hard to make big dramatic changes. And so they make small ones and rely on small changes and over the long term, and I've known Buddhist practitioners who've chosen the small change but persisted over time, and over time, they've been transformed. I've known people who've made dramatic changes, and you know, practical changes in their life. But those dramatic changes didn't result in many, much transformation. You don't know which which is going to be, you know, it depends a lot on the sincerity of your efforts and what you actually do, not necessarily whether you become a monastic or not. So, we have in Buddhism, the image of the Buddha here, we have the statue at IMC, next to me here of the Buddha sitting in meditation. And that's a pretty common image that people have a Buddhism, the meditating Buddha, and he's a peaceful, peaceful fellow who's kind of, you know, his eyes are open in the usual statues. So he's somehow connected to the world that said, but his eyes are downcast and kind of relaxed and soft and so he's not caught in the world are preoccupied with the world, but he's not disconnected from it. Either. The eyes were closed and he said, Then centered on himself relaxed and, and the idea of a peaceful someone who's quite peaceful and so, it might seem that Buddhism therefore emphasize a certain passivity. And then when Buddhist teachers do talk about practice, relaxation, practice acceptance. Okay, okay out there. Okay? Practice acceptance, then it can seem to emphasize this kind of passive sided Buddhism, you're not supposed to do much and just accept things as they are.

In other image that's that Buddhism provides of the Buddha, which is maybe not as well known, but I think is quite interesting as a contrast to this one is that soon after the Buddha left his life, he left the palace and went off to become a renunciant seeker and search for spiritual liberation. He was walking through the streets of one of the capitals of the country in India. And it was time and as a wandering monk, and the local King saw him and the local King was so impressed by his bearing by how he is walking on the street. The King thought, this person is of noble birth, this person is of royal birth, and went out and were somehow called the Buddha in the Buddha to be he wasn't a Buddha yet called him into the palace or went to talk to him and said, You clearly have a noble bearing pedal, they have royal bearing, why don't you stay here with me? And I'll make you my successor. So, you know, I don't know if this true story is true. But the point being in partly was in idea that the Buddha even was offered kingship, and he turned turn that down You know, if you get offered, you know how many of you would turn down winning and get a winning ticket for the California Lottery? I would, you know, I know people who would, because our life we're better off without it, or power or something. So it's an image of you know what I turned away from that kind of world a temptation. The, but the way I'm calling forth this image now is the image of the that somehow he was walking down the street with a kind of bearing in presence that got the attention of a monarch. That's not my mind At least, that's not the image of someone who is you know, passive. It's an image of someone who appears has certain kind of strength and nobility and power in how they are walking down the street. That's how it is for me. That would get the attention of a king because they're interested in power. And in fact, the word for energy here effort is viriya. And viriya comes from the root, Sanskrit word vira, which means hero. And so the Association of effort or energy in Buddhism is heroic effort. And so again the image of, you know, there is a goal or peace in Buddhism, but the goal, the means to that goal sometimes associated with making heroic effort. This is not for the lazy Buddhism. It's not for, it's not for bedside Buddhists, nightstand, Buddhists is called nice and Buddha's just read a lot. And, you know, one of those ways to nudge your trajectory slightly off, where you're going is to read less books on Buddhism and meditate more. You know, so

like, what One guideline is, you know, maybe you should, you know, it's interesting guideline, maybe you should meditate more, at least as much as you read. If you're reading a lot of books on Buddhism at least as much as you read or maybe you should meditate as much as you use the computer for entertainment. No. Now the stakes are high.

So you know heroic effort and some people need heroic effort if they can make a difference in their life. There are people who are deeply entrenched in their attachments, their addictions, probably all of us know someone who has some kind of addiction problem, alcohol or drugs or all kinds of things people are addicted to. And it's really hard to break the patterns of addiction, and it takes certain degree of courage and maybe even heroism to be able to make that big switch that big change. And, or there's, there's takes courage to overcome fear. And some people I know especially people who are young. There's the fear of doing something which is not condoned by one's family or one society. I know that a lot of people who, when I was young went Asia to practice Buddhism, and they brought within their parents in the sense that, you know, my parents don't approve of this, I'm supposed to be going to college. I'm supposed to be, you know, following the career choice of my parents or whatever, and I'm doing something which my parents don't approve of, and, and so there's a fear of approval, fear of acceptance of all kinds of, you know, fear of something, and it takes a certain kind of, for some people courage and heroism, to overcome the fear that can be connected to changing and transforming one's life in a different direction.

Could also take, and this is the paradox of effort. It could take a lot of courage, a lot of heroism to energetically, persistently dedicatedly stay relaxed. Because the forces of tension are so strong the forces of fear the forces of greed or hate are so strong in us. Greed, hate, greed and hate and fear are all things that makes us tense. And to overcome those forces and stay relaxed, sometimes can take a lot of effort. And I think it's beautiful because if the focus is on being relaxed, you're protected from the effort being stressful because if you can't, you can't trust stressfully try to relax, that doesn't work, right? But it can take a lot of effort, a certain kind of effort, and a lot of persistence. And I suggest sometimes courage to be willing to relax and stay relaxed. And one of the very interesting exercises to do is to doubt the value or the importance of being stressed or being tense. Most people don't stop and look at it in question and doubt it. Is it really necessary Why do I feel it's so important to be worried now or so important to be caught up in this are so important to be? And you know, it's one thing when you're relaxed to say, Well, you know, who needs heroic efforts. But when you're up against your belief systems that are operating consciously or unconsciously, that get you kind of contracted to get you Have deeply afraid or worried or anxious? What are those belief systems? what is really going on for you? What's the deeper underlying psychological structures of your mind that lead to that kind of behavior? Is it really necessary? Can you really question it deeply? And if you can question it, can you consider that's not necessary? And if it's not necessary, what would it take for you to overcome that deep psychological conditioning that leads to stress and all the different forms it has? It's a high it's a high challenge, I think that Buddhism offers and, and the time that you're going to kind of maybe appreciate the high challenge is the times when you're most stressed. Because that's when the mind is going to scream sometimes. No way. Am I going to question this? No way. I'm not going to doubt the value of being stressed. Sometimes people People are so they want to they want they want. One of my, one of the very interesting justifications for worry, that I've heard is that in some families apparently, where they worry, anxiety is kind of like, embedded in the family pattern. The way that you show love that you care for other people in the family is by worrying. And so it's important to worry to show your care. And if you don't worry, that means you don't care. But is it possible to care without worrying? I believe it is. So then it's hard because the family you know, whole family system is built around a certain pattern, it's hard to let go of that. So to make a lot of effort to relax, to make a lot, a lot of efforts to let go of strain and stress and holding on as a way of and that's a self worth, it's a way with that kind

of focus. The effort itself is protected from strain and effort, strain effort. So in looking at effort, there are two different important areas. There's, what the what effort we make, and how we make effort. So what that fragment we make, the effort we make the efforts, maybe the endeavors, the things we actually do and put effort into doing. It makes a difference what we do. If you use a lot of mindfulness, develop your mindfulness, and use a lot of mindfulness to steal from your neighbors. That will have a very different effect psychologically on you. If you use all the mindfulness you developed to help your neighbors to support them. You know, two different things you can do but that's the kind dramatic, right?

But there's other things you know, so if you use your time, so let's say you meditate and you get really calm and settled and open, relaxed. This is great. You say there was wondering Thank you there was What is it? Like what are we going to do now? Well, let's go watch three hours of television I mean, that's a choice and you can watch television in a relaxed way that's that's a pretty good thing right? I mean if you're gonna watch television be relaxed. And be open take it in properly receptive to the full impact of the show and don't have any obscurations in your mind that distractions worries that bother you and just take it all in. And when you go see that movie with Dharma friends next week, meditate first so you can really appreciate it. But the but you know you have that wonderful state of wonderful state. Maybe your maybe have a very different effect if if you use that state that you've attained some degree of relaxation, and this is the time maybe to go visit that neighbor who's having a hard time. Maybe he's in bed sick or something and this is a time maybe to call someone you have a difficult conversation with the need to have the conversation. Maybe this is a time to work on your taxes. Because then you're, you know, because you had a good good space for it. So what we do makes a difference. And so in Buddhist practice as well, what we do is important, and so in Buddha's involves deciding what to do, do you mean doing something. And so we could do things that cultivate generosity, we could do things that cultivate ethical integrity, we could do things that help us with letting go and useful ways. We can do things to develop wisdom, we can do things to develop our energy or effort. So that's some of the things we could do so you can consider what could what my life can do that can cultivate my capacity for generosity. If generosity is understood to be a support for this path. Then what can I do to cultivate ethical integrity, if that's an important part of this? That's some things you can do. You can look, you know, my goal in life is to become free of suffering to become liberated to become freer than I am now. So what are the things I can do to support that to happen, and perhaps meditation has a role, perhaps letting go more in your life as a role, perhaps reading some of those Dharma books is important. Coming to hear talks, there's many things you can do that would support you in the choice you've made the life direction you want to go. And there's a whole whole big repertoire of things a person can do. They support them along the Buddhist path. And different times we do different things. Sometimes people like to put together kind of a package. And so different times of the day or different days or they do different aspects of this. But without doing something, there's no Buddhist path. The path only exists in the doing. If you come to IMC and you look for the Buddhist path, you will not find it. You can look around in the cupboards, you can look under the, you know, the closets and, you know use some of it doesn't exist here you can try to list ever so carefully to Gil's Dharma talks. And you will not find the Buddhist path and Gil's Dharma talks doesn't exist there. The only place it exists is in you. In the person who walks the path that does it. So involve some doing some walking. So there's what you do, there's doing something. But then as important in what you do, is how you do it. The how you do what is very important. The first question, maybe there was a second question. Anyway. One of the first questions, real questions I asked my first Zen teacher, they walked up to him in the hallway, the temple and I said, you know, I'm interested in all this stuff. But what's the right effort with which to practice and meditation? And he looked at me and responded, very clearly directly said, who's making the effort? And I was 21 years old, and I didn't have a clue what he was saying. But, but I think it was, was a was a great answer, who's making the effort? And who's making the effort has different connotations different, could do different things without question. One of the questions is to look at when we make effort, what are all the images, self images, self representations, we have, ideas we

have about who we are, when we're making effort. We can have a lot of self limiting ideas about who we are, that are subconsciously are connected to how we make effort.

There are people who make effort that carry with them in the background, this idea that they can not only if they succeed, will they get the brownie points? Will they get a badge? And will they become a worthy person. And then in order to become a worthy person, you have to succeed at things. And so they're looking at success and failure as being really important part of their self representation. And if that's their, that's too deeply kind of, in the fabric of their self understanding that they have to be a successful person, avoid failure, it might trip up to the very effort they're doing. There might be a sense of obligation, especially when it comes to religion. I mean, religion is such so oppressive, like Buddhism, sometimes, if we if we carry with it, the idea of obligation, thou shalt be a spiritual person, thank you. And you have to make the right effort to prove to the world that you're, you know, a good spiritual person. And so this obligation is the shooting is so strong. There's no playfulness, there's no joy. There's no delight and Doing the practice and doing it. But as you saw the show, you know, kind of strong sense of shared obligation. And I know some people coming from religions where shooting has been a really important part of it, cut, bring that with them to Buddhism sometimes and feel like you know, unless they do it and do it the right way that somehow they'll, you know, they don't fall to hell. Another thing people bring with how they do it is sometimes is self defeating attitudes. This is too hard. It's, you know, the enlightenment of the Buddha mean, the Buddha's like sees, like, you know, that's like, you know, he sits on top of the huge spiritual mountain. I'm in the Grand Canyon bottom. And, you know, who am I, you know, it's so hard, it's the walls of that mountain. They're so steep and I'm so weak and so in cake and bowling. I know I should do this, but I guess I will. You know, but then, like half hearted efforts, you know? And, you know, so the effort is half hearted and doesn't really go anywhere. It's kind of like you walk up the mountain and more like you're walking up a sand dune and you take one step up and you slide down. And so there can be a lot of self defeating attitudes that are in meshed with how people make effort, some people and bring with them and how they make effort, a lot of strain. And they contract and they try really hard. And when you strain and try really hard, it doesn't work. So there's a famous story of this story. It's, you know, maybe you know, these kind of archetypical stories, so you'll maybe go along with the imagery, but there was, you know, arrogant, capable, aristocratic, spoiled man who came to the monastery He was very capable, and things he did. And so he came in he came to the abbot and said, I'm here to become a monk can become enlightened. If I work really hard, how long will it take me to get enlightened? And they said, Oh, about 10 years 10 years. But what if I really redoubled my efforts and make a really a lot of effort? You really gonna? How long will it take then just full, courageous, heroic efforts. Oh, the abbot said. In that case, it'll take 20 years. And one of the interesting kind of aspects about effort, it's kind of sometimes spiritual effort, like meditation is kind of like you know, if you're in it for the long term, and you really understand that spiritual growth and development is generally a slow process. It's you know, that you generally put yourself in for the long term, then it's kind of like the marathon if you run a marathon, you don't go all out the first hundred yards. You patient yourself, are you capable of giving 100% of your effort, the first hundred yards you're capable, but then you won't be able to do the marathon. So what you do is, I don't know what percentage what percentage of effort Do you give the first hundred yards that you could actually theoretically give? 5% so she runs marathons. So only it mean it means 5% I mean, the failure. I mean, you don't you shouldn't be trying hard and give it your best. So the point is that spiritual practice can be like that way to that sometimes you don't want to give it your hundred percent effort. Because you just exhaust yourself, you burn yourself up. And I tell people do a 5% hoping he would take more men do that maybe that's what's wise. 5%

I actually tell people like on retreat, you know what you really need like 60% of your efforts. Name is not a marathon. So 60% of your effort. In order to, you know, it's a bit, but too many people try too hard and they try 90 or 100%. And they just get exhausted and tie themselves up in knots. So, sometimes you

want to make an effort that's persistent and come back, but you don't make too much effort. And so same thing with daily meditation practice or daily life. If you have this big should and try really super hard to be super person, it might actually be kind of productive. The other thing about effort is it really helps if you enjoy the effort. And for some people, the word effort and enjoyment are contradictory. But I hope that you have some things you do in your life that you enjoy. Now, I know that I go hang out sometimes at elementary school playgrounds. And because I have a kid in elementary school and boy is A lot of energy expended in the playground, a lot of energy. I mean, I wouldn't be able to, I'd be exhausted if I was doing what they were doing very quickly. But they seem to do fine. We can probably power the California Energy shortage if we plugged it into these kids playgrounds. And so, they make a lot of energy. They use a lot of energy. And we could say that they're expanding. They're making a lot of effort. But they're enjoying it. They're having fun, it's play for them. Can there can spiritual practice, can Buddhist practice, even meditation practice? How elements of play enjoyment as part of it, and I think that's actually very important is how can we find a way sometimes it's not easy, sometimes it's not enjoyable, absolutely not enjoyable. Sometimes, Buddhist meditation practice is completely miserable to do because it involves a deep meeting with our demons, sometimes a deep meeting with the things we're most afraid of, or the deep meetings of our deep shadow or whatever you want to call it. And if you're going to sometimes you need heroic persistence to stay in the darkness, a dark night of the soul, to see to see it through to sometimes, uh, you know, it's not not pretty. But there's also times when it should be enjoyable. And bring kinda light and inspiration even when it's difficult. There can be a certain kind of delight or joy. Wow, I have a path. There's a path there. There's a practice here. There's teaching there's, there's there's this beautiful thing to be engaged in. It's hard for me right now, but I'm so glad to be in it. So it can but sometimes it can clearly explicitly to be playful. I've sometimes. I mean, I mean, I don't want to tell you What I do sometimes what I've done sometimes, but many people, I mean, this is, you know, years ago, but their assignment I, in order to kind of get into kind of following the breath, I pretended it was a pinball machine, you know, and if the breath was the ball and my attention was the little flippers I didn't do it for long, but that was kind of fun. It got me into it, and then I could drop the play that you know, the little game. Or sometimes the, it feels like I'm surfing on a wave and the breath is a wave and I've caught the wave and just feels exquisite just kind of gliding along. But I think that for me, one of the things that maybe it's has to do with my character or something, but I just like making effort. I feel so lucky that I can do something engage. And so just the fact that I can you know, practice and put my my, my mind towards something my heart towards something, my body energy towards something and be engaged in something wholesome and healthy. That just that itself just makes me happy. Happy enough that sometimes I don't care so much about the results. It's the doing that is delightful. The results can take care of themselves. And so that's one of the ways to trip yourself up is to be too caught up in the results. some sense of results and a goal is important. But it's really good to forget the goal and the results. And once you once you have once you're headed in the right direction, and just kind of get absorbed joyfully, happily, in the process of effort itself engagement itself.

And if we begin looking at how to how we're making effort, and clarify, purify, clean up how and make effort then We've much better luck with succeeding and in what we do. And if what we do is a path of liberation, we're much more likely to walk that path effectively. If what we're doing is walking a path of compassion, being of service to the world. If we've clarified and purified, how we do our work will be much more effective and being compassionate. And if you're walking a path that is both in path of combat where compassion and liberation or go hand in hand, then if you purify how you practice, the hardware for how you make the effort, then both liberation and compassion will go much more smoothly and happily. So that's my big cheerleading talk for the year. Hoping that you will be inspired to Make effort and that in doing so, you will be delighted and relax. So thank you all very much