

2012-02-12 Reflections On Effort

Thu, 8/20 6:11PM • 41:55

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

effort, people, discomfort, pleasure, meditation, helpful, striving, avoid, buddha, question, sit, pain, associations, idea, life, principle, effortless, feel, bit, relationship

SPEAKERS

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So today, I would like to talk about effort. And for those people for whom effort is an oppressive topic, I'll talk about non effort.

And so effort is a without effort, there's no practice, you know, unless you meditate, there's no meditation, you have to make some effort to meditate. If you have values, important values that you want to live by, without living by them without making efforts to live by them, those values really have no purpose, just kind of abstract values to carry around in your head. You know, they need to be put into action. And, in the same similar way, Buddhism wouldn't exist because Buddhism itself exists only as people who practice it to live To walk the path, and so it requires effort. And in the teach in the classic teachings, there's all these lists of psychological practice element of factors that come into play when someone walks the path. And it's interesting that effort appears in a number of them. And it's interesting what effort follows. So for example, in the list called the five faculties, the five faculties we have capacities we have that get that get come into play when we do anything at all. Effort follows the factor of confidence or faith. So what we have faith in when we have confidence in what we trust, is if is a important factor for the arising of effort. In a sense, the faith factor or the confidence bank factor is what gives direction to effort, what inspires us to make Some effort and some direction. So based on confidence, then there's action effort in a different list called the 10 power armies 10 perfections effort follows wisdom. And so why is understanding is the basis for wise effort? And so you need having some kind of understanding helps us understand what kind of effort to make, what efforts make what kind of actions to do and how to make the effort in those actions. In a different list called the Eightfold Path, effort follows the effort factor follows the three ethics factors. So, right speech, right action and right livelihood. And the idea that making appropriate right effort in Buddha in Buddhist practice is based hopefully based on a foundation of being having personal integrity. So somehow there's something about being settled on one Being holding oneself having integrity or ethic ethical integrity, which is a basis for further actions or efforts. So, and the Buddha, there's all kinds of beautiful quotes from good, I think, oppressive quotes. Like he said, things like, Buddha's only point away, they only teach, it's up to you to make the effort. Or there's even a little quote says, be quick to make effort. So, for some people, this kind of language is oppressive, because of the some people have very quick associations with the word effort. You have to make effort or you have to do this. And so what we know what are some of the associations and maybe negative associations and you when you hear the word effort, I mean, I can offer some. So for example, you know, as soon as you're told you have to make effort Then there's been a lot, I'm not capable, or doubt arises, you know, with it. It's just exhausting. You know, just to make effort, and I just need a break. I don't need to make more effort. Or now I'm being told what to do by someone. And the rebellious, rebellious nature comes up in no way, you know, it's oppressive to be told. Or there can be fear of failure. If I make effort, I might fail. Occasionally, there's a fear of success. Some people don't want to succeed because of what they might happen. What are some of the other

fact things that might come up for people that when the thought of effort or the concept of effort comes up, you know, the red flags go up? One time Oh, I don't have time for that. Okay. It's work. What's in work? What's your work implies exhaustion.

So for you the work concept work means repetitious as mindless is what you do Monday morning. And so just effort kind of ties into that kind of idea of what work is for you. Good. What else? unpleasant house effort unpleasant. Oh, if it didn't take effort, it'd be fun to do it. So play doesn't require any effort. Even though requires lots of energy. So there's the difference between effort and energy? I suppose right. So the word effort has a connotation of on twice Yeah. Do it dude oh obligation. The Hammer of effort soon.

I see so in the past, the idea of effort came along with a lot of striving and trying so hard that, you know, that caused problems stress. So now there's fear of making effort because if I make effort I'll do myself in.

Yes, we picked up this idea of great athletes who do things effortlessly. And therefore if we have to exert effort, it seems to imply that we're not able or skillful if we were, then we wouldn't need effort

naturally. So if we were if we were wise and capable, then we would be like, great athletes who we have this idea that they do their work their their athleticism effortlessly. Because it's not effortless for us we've already failed we're already losers

yes suffocation Wow. So would you like to say a little bit more about

so there's all this energy like think meditation sitting still. There's all this boundless energy they want you to Boogie Woogie dance or something and move and to sit still it's, you know, oppressive to sometimes to kind of hold that in and be still. Yes please. negates spontaneity because if you're making effort It is intentional. It's pre planned. It's all that and so there's no turning away with your effort. There's no room for something new to happen nurse meetings. Yes, please in the back.

So so if there's efforts, you might get tripped up around the expectation that something's going to happen. And that can take many forms. It could be expecting the unreasonable. It could be, you know, having an expectation which, you know, you're measuring yourself by the expectation and so if you don't succeed, then it's a feeling a feeling of failure, perhaps.

Ah, so you label something effort implies there's resistance to it. There's something so effortless requires overcoming some inertia at something

so like Mara saying to the Buddha, who are you Who Do You Think You Are you can sit here and become enlightened. So doubt arises Who are you to do this effort? Who are you to do this activity? The pin

so not only might you fail, but you might fail publicly.

Okay, I'm convinced let's just let's just throw in the towel and go to the beach.

Am I getting pulled into something committed to something Ah, so as the actual being motivated by you, or you kind of being herded by other people, your boss or peer pressure or something and so it's not

really personal. So sacrifice is important to kind of kind of, so the idea of effort means you have to give something up yourself. Stop. I feel I feel I need now to, to to try to redeem the word effort. For us, good luck. So who has positive associations with efforts who when they hear the word effort, kind of like kind of Oh, that's energizing. Good, good. Yeah. What direction so effort means it's a direction and some hope that you have maybe going someplace? Yeah. All the way in the back.

Yep, I'm sorry I couldn't hear so.

So so effort is welcoming because if you want to make any kind of progress in something and grow in some way some effort is needed. Okay? Yes.

So effort he experienced effort as an ally vnus doing is in a lightness so for you you delight in the lightness, the vitality that comes with making effort. Okay, good. Yes in the corner. Also effort associated with accomplishment and that's a positive thing making accomplishment something to appreciate to celebrate last week we talked about sympathetic joy. And that's one of those things to feel joy. It is a people's accomplishments. It's a beautiful thing. Yes, fulfillment. So, with effort comes fulfillment. If you sit on your couch and do nothing, there's, you know, you you there's not much fulfillment except filling your couch. Yes. Once you make for you the association is once you make a commitment to doing something, then it becomes effortless. You can get behind it. Okay. effort is associated with expansion, expansion how.

So going towards something that's more open and expansive rather than being contracted, it's kind of breaking out of your shell maybe. Okay, beautiful. This is David associated with adventurousness

Focus.

So it's focused aligning your self around something, get yourself on a path. So give a sense of purpose to life direction in life.

So effort has association with fierceness and integrity and alignment with yourself and your posture in a good way. associated with inner strength and power perhaps in a nice way. Yes. Sorry. inspiration. So effort and inspiration go together.

So associated with heroism and the Bodhisattva idea, actually the word for effort, that's translators effort, often English or energy is viriya. viriya means comes from the word Veera, which means hero. So this idea of being heroic, the effort is not not you know, just is built into the word and Pāli in Buddhism. I see some in the back there. Yes, author. Creativity, energy. So with effort comes creativity. Yes. freedom of choice. So with effort, there's possible freedom of choice. So anticipation of something good happened when my son was a young young, I don't know how old he was seven or something. There was a period of time where he got tremendous joy out of anticipation. I never seen anything like it. You know, like, you know, you know, so you know, something novel for me, he would he would lay in bed and think about what was coming up. It was more like the anticipation was more fun than the event. And so I think went through that phase. It was quite nice. Yes. competence. So with effort, you comes at the cat comm where there can be associative association of competence which feels good, right? Okay. Yes.

So the joy, the joy of exertion, joy of doing. Yes,

the effort can make you stronger.

So even if you fail the efforts, even fitting failed effort, the effort that you exerted to strengthen the muscle that effort or that endeavor, you might also learn from your so called failures. Now, you know, it's maybe it's useful, hopefully not discouraging, or useful to say that the batting average for meditators is a lot poorer than the batting average of professional baseball players. That's That's why we don't make as much money he said, You know, you're gonna. Meditation is a lot about losing the present moment and then coming back and losing the present moment coming back and missing the ball. Every once in a while we hit the ball. So, any more thoughts? Yes. satisfaction of going beyond your comfort level. Great. Wow, I'm so delighted that we've managed to redeem the word.

So, so there are a lot of associations with the word effort. I think it's important for everyone to look at their own associations because without effort, and you know, there's some people have strong, some of them some of the descriptions are very strong negative connotations. The effort, it's work Some of them were delightful and seem almost like play. If effort is simply the expenditure of energy and doing something, which is a neutral statement, you know, so it's then what is our relationship to doing? What's our relationship to efforts to expending energy, and because the relationship you have, will color, the doing that you do, it might prevent you from engagement. It might mean when you engage or engage with reluctance, with hostility, even it might, you might engage with too much expectation with too much desire for the goal. You might, you might be able to, you might be engaged in a very beautiful way. Sometimes the relationship to effort means that some people delight in the efforting itself. And, you know, just to be able to exert oneself, you know, like playing sometimes like playing a game Some people just delight in the game in the playing of it. It doesn't matter whether you win or lose you know just the doing is fun. And some people in practice Buddhist practice can have the same thing they just there's just a delight their life and just practicing doesn't really matter how well you succeed and some people put so much emphasis on succeeding and success and have to get somewhere and they measure themselves and they can like kind of trip trip them up quite a bit. I think the more you measure your your progress, spiritual progress, the slower the progress is the and then, you know, some people in terms of a spiritual path like being in a Buddhist path, just simply knowing there's a path and that you're on the path and you're walking it is so valuable, so meaningful. That succeeding is kind of second importance, it's not that important to get, you know, it's important to make progress in a sense. But even if you don't make progress, it's so special that you actually found in this lifetime found a path and be able to walk it isn't that great. And so even so that it's not so you know, you don't measure everything by your success, you measure by Well, I'm on the path, and I'll do the best I can. But even if I don't get very far, it's just pretty cool that I found it. So to look at your look at your associations, your attitudes towards effort, I think is really important, really valuable. And it's something that you can journal about, you can talk to friends about, if you have a good friend who knows you well enough, over many years, perhaps you can say, you know, this is what I'm thinking about effort, but what have you observed about me? Maybe they have some observations about you that maybe it's not obvious to you about your relationship to making effort. So I think, you know, that's kind of personal exploration. exploration is good in the teachings of the Buddha He gave a guideline for effort. And this guideline is really lays at the heart of what the Buddha was trying to teach. The Buddha did not start his teachings on first principle, but rather started as teachings on a problem or a question. And the problem is the problem of suffering, which is kind of a simple you know catch all word for stress, distress, anxiety, you know, whatever we call our anguish or suffering. And, and then the question is, how can we overcome that, how can we get beyond it, how can we become free, how can be relieved released of our suffering, so, that So, rather than the surrounding the principle that this is the truth. So, like some people take as a Buddhist principle, you know that this is like the fundamental thing Buddhism to most what's the basic teachings of Buddhism? And some people will say, oh, that there's no self. That's a principle. The Buddha never said that, by the way. But that's, you know, starts with you starting with a

principle. Rather, the teachings of not self are meant to be an action that answers the question. How do you overcome suffering? It's not meant to be a principle to believe or teachings to believe. It's meant to be an approach and an action that helps free us from suffering.

So the CIO starts with, not with a principal but with a question or problem. And then then the emphasis in the effort is what is the effort that's useful to help solve that problem? And what is the effort that's not helpful? So what what what is the he would use the word skillful, what's skillful And what's not skillful, or I like the word, you're too helpful and not helpful for this purpose. So then, in the time of the Buddha, people had all kinds of ideas about pleasure. And people still have all kinds of different religions of ideas of pleasure, the appropriateness of pleasure, and you have some people will feel like you shouldn't have any pleasure. You know, that's if your pleasure is kind of a sign of sinfulness or something and you should be no happy pain is better than pleasure. And if you have enough pain, then somehow you'll get redeemed, you'll get saved, you'll something. There are some extreme religious teachings and those regards, as they were around that time of the Buddha, they were people who really into the importance of suffering ascetic practices, as a way of exhausting your karma. You have to kind of or starve your defilements starve your bad nature so that it wouldn't interfere so you can set free the soul or something. So that so and then there Back in ancient India, there was also a very strong negative idea about overindulgence in sensual pleasure. So you can't do that. So, but people came to the Buddhist or what's, what should we do about pleasure? And so his answer about pleasure was not based on a principle, but rather in a sense, but you know, right and wrong, but rather was pragmatic. So the question is, was, what you should pursue that or I said, to pursue the pleasure, which is helpful and avoid the pleasure. That's not helpful. And then what about this pleasure? What about discomfort? What about pain? What's your relationship with that? And the Buddha said, you should avoid the pain that is discomfort, which is not helpful and you should not avoid the discomfort, the pain which is helpful. So this what this requires Is requires our wisdom, our discernment to look at every situation and see what is this pleasure? Is this helpful or not helpful? To look at discomfort, pain and say, is this helpful to stay with this or is it not? not helpful? So for example, if there's, you know, if there's a lot of pleasure in drinking alcohol you know it certainly pleasant and pleasure to justify it and just get into it because of the pleasure of it. Not if your whole family and work life is being destroyed by the addiction to alcohol, so that that pursuit of that pleasure is not helpful for someone. There's pleasure to be found. In like last week we talked about sympathetic joy which is a very pleasant things enjoyable and sympathetic joy is a pleasure which opens the heart softens the heart, which supports It helps the spiritual life in Buddhist point of view. And that's a pleasure to pursue. There's the pleasure of meditation is considered to be one of the great important pleasures for meditators. And, and it's a useful pleasure to have. So if you start feeling pleasure, even rapture, ecstasy in meditation, for the Buddha, that was a good thing to have happen that's supportive. So don't avoid that pleasure. So certain pleasures you should avoid. Now, what kind of pains and discomforts do you avoid and what do you not avoid? Some people have the attitude. If it's uncomfortable, if there's pain, there's if there's an that it's already bad. I'm already a loser or a failure, or it should be avoided at all costs. And successful life is a comfortable life. I must be doing something wrong, if I'm uncomfortable, but I know there is some times when It's good to avoid discomfort. But there are times when discomfort should be embraced. So for example, if if I have like I remember when I was a new practitioner

I started noticing how much selfing went on for me how much I was trying to prove myself apologize for myself, defend myself in relation to other people. And that was I was really caught up in this whole world of being someone not being someone. And I saw at some point I had the opportunity to just become a hermit or like just pull back it was so painful to see all this that I didn't want to be with a pain so now I'll just recede go to my room just not be involved with people at all. So obviously avoid this thing. Now that wasn't so you For me, what was useful for me was to stay in the fire. This habit, strong

habit I have, and allow myself to feel that discomfort to live without discomfort. So I can see much more clearly how, what I was doing, so I can get through it understand it. So there was an example where it was painful to see myself, but it was valuable to in a certain kind of way embrace it, to go towards it, to really understand deeply enough to avoid it. Someone who has an addiction problem, it's can be very unpleasant, to not pick up the bottle. Some of the some of the sensations and feelings and, you know, part of the reason why some people are addicted is because of very being uncomfortable in some way and themselves. And so to constantly avoid their own discomfort, there fear the anxiety might it might not be helpful, it might be helpful. In the right way, with the right support, to actually learn to be present for one's discomfort, and to open to it and see what's there to unpack it, to learn to relax into it, to go go through it, rather than keeping avoiding it. So there's lots of examples where, you know, where I think in life where it's appropriate to be present for discomfort. For meditators, sometimes, sometimes there's physical pain that arises in meditation, should you What should you do? There are people who follow a principle. I've been around Buddhists to do this, that you should just sit through it all, no matter what the pain is, sit through it. And you know, I've known people who have actually physically damaged themselves because they weren't going to know their knees went out and they needed the surgery. Because there was going to sit with knee pain, no matter what was the principle of being a samurai. And then I've known people, lots of people who first indication of pain, hints, a pain, you know, they can be to be avoided at all costs, shift they move, they run out the door. Anything to you know, but so you know, pain should not be experienced. That's the principle people have. But the approach I think you'd hear in Buddhist practice is to ask the question, is it helpful to stay with this pain? Or is it not helpful to stay with it? So sometimes it's not helpful to stay with a pain. And sometimes it is. So an example of where it might be helpful to stay with a pain. There might be physical pain in meditation, that arises from chronically tense muscles. And so like, I feel that sometimes my shoulders I hold a certain amount of tension in my shoulders at times. And so when I sit down to meditate, sometimes I'm aware of discomfort in my shoulders, a little tense. So I could have the policy, no way am I going to feel It's uncomfortable, it's bad. And it's probably assign them a failed Buddhist You know, my from intimate teaching the stuff, I shouldn't have 10 shoulders. And so, you know, I better run away or hide or avoid it. Or maybe I should do some yoga, stretching and exercising, running. And I'll eventually get to the meditation. That's one approach another approach, which is what I take I say, Oh, you know, given how I live my life, this is that's there today. And what I found is is useful is to a certain kind of way, embrace that the aching or the tension that's there, and just hold it in awareness, hold it lightly and openly. And it's actually more useful to be present for that discomfort than it is to avoid it. And it's more more actually is more useful sometimes to be present for it, than to get a massage or do something exercise that might make it go away. Because if that's kind of like dealing from the outside in, and meditation deals with from the inside out, You get to look you'll get to look at or work with the deeper forces the impulses this that bring up the stress to begin with. And so it's useful to stay without discomfort. Sometimes it can be quite intense the chronically held muscles and how we get how things are hold. Sometimes it's quite intense the emotions we have

you know, if you have maybe through through some mistake or maybe not a mistake, maybe your your your frustration got the upper hand and, and in your frustration you said something really mean to your best friend. You know who's been really supportive of you're likely you know, if at the end of that, if you return you realize what you've done. If you just say off so what so what, and you've kind of just goes skipping down the street, kind of you know, whistling Dixie or something. I don't think That's, you know, you're a spiritual person, everything's fine. You know. I don't think that's a very wise life. I think that if you have just out of your some, your, your poor judgment, you did something you said to me really mean to your good friend really hurt your friend. I think the appropriate thing is to feel your own discomfort around that. If you don't allow yourself to feel that discomfort, I don't think you're going to grow. I don't think you acknowledge you really feel the fullness of what happened there. It's appropriate

to feel discomfort sometimes. So the wise understanding would be to look at is this helpful or not helpful to feel this pleasure? Is it helpful or not helpful to feel this discomfort or this pain? And then you know, it's not always obvious, but to at least ask the question being exploring it rather than having so the same thing with effort. What kind of effort should we make here? How many we can get for what way should I be effort here. I should be heroic. Or I don't believe in effort. I think effortless effort, I thought it's better not to do anything, just let things unwind. So the question is what is helpful, and sometimes it's helpful to make a lot of effort. And sometimes it's helpful. It's not helpful to make a lot of effort. Sometimes it's helpful to make no effort. And sometimes it's not helpful to make no effort. People who are chronic doers, neurotic doers. It's really useful to practice non doing for a while. And it's amazing what can happen when we stop our efforts. If you sit down quietly and stop making effort, stop making progress, stop turning accomplish anything. Sometimes it allows something deep inside the subtle to unwind and something deep inside to come forth and show itself so much so that sometimes it feels like the Buddhist path when you're meditating opens up for you by itself effortlessly, if you just get out of the way. And other times Nothing will happen. If you just sit there do nothing. I knew a woman once who after many years of practice very, very intense, serious practice, seemingly seemingly, she looked like a great practitioner. She said, Forget this Buddhism, I'm leaving, because nothing happened to her. And then I kind of inquired, well, what, what we know what were you doing all these years? Well, I was just sitting there. And I thought if I just sat, eventually, if I did my time on the cushion, I'd be rewarded. So she was kind of this magic passive thinking that if I didn't, I don't have to do anything. I just have to kind of keep being kind of just sitting on the cushion. I just kind of keep showing up for retreats and something will be handed to me. That, you know, it doesn't work that way. Sometimes for people you have, sometimes you have to make some effort you have to do, you have to engage. So those are so two, we come to the end here, I'd like to kind of summarize with two points, I'd like you to think about this you leave today. What is the point about your own relationship to effort? Think about it, reflect on it. And the second is this idea of evaluating your effort, what you do what you do if you're through this principle, is it helpful or not helpful? And do you have a clear sense of what helpfulness and helpfulness actually is because it does imply a certain kind of sense of purpose or goal or possibility. That's the guide. You have to have some idea of what's helpful to know what's helpful. You have to you have to have some idea where you're going To answer the question, what is helpful? And then, so you're at your relationship to effort.

Understanding this principle of evaluate evaluating things by whether it's helpful or unhelpful. And then bring those two together. By then evaluating is your relationship to effort, your attitude and policy about effort. Is it a helpful policy helpful ID? Or is it not helpful? And is are there more helpful attitudes you can have about effort than the ones you usually carry with you? So that might be interesting to explore for you. So we have five minutes, and might be nice to get some questions, some comments, some reservations, some further thoughts about this. And maybe time for one or two.

I like most people have a morbid feel of public speaking. And I decided that I would pursue more opportunities to do public speaking in hopes to alleviate some of that tension, some of that hell. And by making the effort to take some classes to open myself up to those situations, I'm liberating myself from some of these blockades

beautiful. So you spoke in front of over 100 people here. And yeah, so there's so sometimes what we have to put a lot of effort in sometimes uncomfortable effort. You might break into a sweat in order to break through the limitations we're living under. And so that's what you've chosen to do. And then at some point it becomes easier. And that as you move it easier then it becomes more enjoyable to read. Because when you find

Yeah, it's actually become. And I think part of it is the contrast between how it used to be and how it is now I'm having fun doing it,

you're in fun doing it. So it was helpful to do this even though it was uncomfortable and a drag and it was helpful abroad to study or some to some sense what would be helpful and, and you had the inspiration and the encouragement and the faith. It was worthwhile doing. Nice. Right behind you.

I guess when we were speaking about the darker sides of effort, someone mentioned, striving and being really attached to that striving or clinging to that striving How do you point yourself in a direction? You know, take effort in a direction that you believe is a good direction or right direction, but not

find that attachment, or in order to keep the detachment from it.

That's the question. Thank you. Perfect. That's the that's the kind of question. I think we keep with us all the time. There's not a one answer that fits it. And it's a lot of it's found through trial and error. You try, you do you engage, and then you monitor yourself. That's what mindfulness is. Mindfulness is being present as you're doing it. So you have the ability to make corrections. So, you know, sometimes you have to make more effort. And sometimes you have to make a really strong effort like the lady here who is essentially striving to work hard at it. To overcome her fear of public speaking. But at some point, if she overcomes her fear of public speaking entirely, that effort that she made kind of, maybe I shouldn't speak for you, but the effort you made to really kind of strive and overcome limitation becomes the wrong effort to make was right at a certain point. But at some certain point, it just wants you having fun doing it. It'll just get in the way. So sometimes, you know, pushing is right, sometimes it's not right. Sometimes striving is the right word. Sometimes it's not the right word for what it is. And so we have to monitor ourselves and see what the consequences are. If we're getting tense, that's indication, you may need to back off a little bit. If we're getting complacent and falling asleep, maybe I need to make more efforts, maybe strive a little bit now. Or I've been held back, you know, I keep not doing anything and just sitting and sitting up. I need to maybe maybe striving is a good thing for me to overcome. So I think I think it's trial and error. And trial and error has a lot to do with air. And so has a lot to do with in learning learning from, you know, when it's, you know, and it's a little bit like driving a car, you know, on the freeway. As far as I know, No One No One drives the car perfectly straight in their lane, you know, never wavering one inch, but the cars are constantly, you know, moving a little bit to the left a little bit to the right. I mean, hopefully it's only a couple of inches. And, and, and you have to kind of track that and move a little bit to the left a little bit to right make up for it, to bring it back to center. So same thing with effort and like meditation practice. You know, hopefully the swings are not that great. Hopefully you stay in your lane. But it's a little bit too much. It's too little. And so you're finding your way. So it's a good question to have. That's what I would keep the question. So thank you all very much.