

Viriya (2 of 5): Right Endeavor

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on March 24, 2020

Again, good morning. The theme for the talks this week is effort. Yesterday I emphasized initiating effort. Initiating effort sometimes takes a lot of energy because the forces of distraction, preoccupation, or strong inner emotions or desires can sometimes take over, making it very hard to be present. Sometimes initiating effort takes a lot of effort – sometimes it takes very little. In terms of meditation and being aware, initiating effort often has to be done over and over again.

It's not an incidental thing to keep beginning again. It's a powerful conditioning: shaping, realigning, harmonizing, and resetting us. What is it that drives us, that moves us? Where are we? How present, how aware can we be in this life?

As initiating effort takes hold, we begin to become a little more familiar with and able to see what is happening in the present moment. Maybe we can even dwell in the present moment more fully for some period of time – just enough to see that we have some choice about where we put our energy and effort. That comes with the second aspect of effort, which in the Buddha's teachings is called "right endeavoring" or "right endeavor," the sixth step of the Eightfold Path. It's called 'endeavor' because it is what we are trying to do, what we are aiming towards in our practice.

There is a very simple principle involved in understanding what right endeavor is. It's not a particular thing we do, but it is a way of finding our bearings, our direction, what's useful to do, what's important to do. The analogy I'll give for it is of a farmer growing plants for food. That farmer has four different activities that must be done in order to grow those plants. First, they must clear the ground, so that there is space for the plants to grow. The ground needs to be tilled and fertilized, so that the seeds can grow there. There is clearing away the weeds. The second step is that, if weeds do grow, one must remove them. The farmer must keep tilling the soil to keep the weeds from growing. The next two principles are that the farmer needs to plant the seeds or the seedlings that will grow into a food plant. Then they must nourish the growth of the plants to allow them to keep growing: water, maybe fertilize, and protect them.

In practice, these steps are called "avoiding, removing, cultivating, and maintaining." What this means in practice is that we want to remove and avoid unhelpful states of mind, unskillful activities, things that are psychologically, spiritually, or physically unwholesome. We want to plant the seeds of what is wholesome, skillful, helpful, or healthy. Once we have planted those seeds, we want to keep them going.

Many years ago a friend told me about a kayaker in Alaska who came up with his own analogy for these four right endeavors. A kayaker has to stay out of trouble out in the open sea. When the kayaker gets into trouble, they must get out of trouble. They should cultivate good kayaking skills. And then the kayaker should maintain those skills.

When we find ourselves meditating with enough presence of mind to recognize what is happening, we may have the capacity to distinguish between what leads to our detriment, suffering, or getting contracted and tight – and what direction leads to becoming free of the suffering, contraction, tension, or pressure in which we're caught.

One purpose of initiating effort in mindfulness practice is to bring us to being present enough that we do begin to see, feel, sense, or perceive this very simple distinction between where the suffering, tension, pressure, or stress is – and where we find non-suffering: that which is wholesome, freeing, opening, relaxing. What activities of mind or body lean more in one direction or in the other direction? We want to see, and then make a very simple course correction, letting go of what is harmful, unhealthy, unhelpful – and pick up what is healthy.

In terms of meditation itself, it might entail looking at how we are meditating. If we are present enough to see that we are meditating with striving or in a tense way, we can feel the tension, the pressure, and even the suffering, striving, pushing, expecting, demanding, or wanting something to happen. I have known people who've gotten headaches from trying so hard, pushing so hard to get something to happen.

We can feel for ourselves, “Oh, this hurts! It’s not comfortable. It’s unhealthy to keep doing it.” Then we can ask, “Is there is another way? Can we move to the other side, to what is wholesome? Can we bring a wholesome approach to mindfulness? Can we be more relaxed as we cultivate awareness of the present moment? How can we be relaxed and persistent?” To see the difference between trying too hard and relaxed persistence is very helpful.

There might be things we are thinking about, or beliefs we have about meditation that are operating. We might, for example, believe that it’s wrong to have physical pain, or that we’re a bad person for wandering off in thought, or that if we’re spiritual, we shouldn’t be thinking or feeling certain things. But if we pay careful attention to what it feels like to have those thoughts, we can feel the narrowing, constriction, dampening, and shutting down of the inner light. It hurts. There’s an ouch in those kinds of thoughts – so those are considered unwholesome or unhelpful for us. If we criticize ourselves for having those thoughts, that’s even more ouch, more unwholesome.

Instead, what we do is to explore, and see if we can find other more appropriate thoughts. Can we cultivate other thoughts, look at other viewpoints in our experience? One way, which is at the center of mindfulness practice, is to replace critical thoughts with equanimous awareness – to have the thought that:

This too is appropriate to experience right now. This too is appropriate to hold in the field of open awareness. This too can be held as ok. This is how it is. I don’t have to be critical of it. I don’t have to support it. I don’t have to be engaged in it, but I can be simply aware of it.

This kind of thinking is more helpful and more supportive. So, try to have this thinking, and try to do it. Try to be there with it, not making a problem with anything.

This principle of right endeavoring is based on what we let go of and what we cultivate. Those are the two big areas where the energy of Buddhist practice goes. Sometimes the focus is on letting go. Sometimes the focus is on cultivation, developing, or doing something wholesome or skillful.

If you keep looking and reflecting on whether this is right endeavoring, then the very way you make the effort of right endeavor hopefully will be nourishing, satisfying, and relaxing. I say that because, for not a few, the language of effort is almost oppressive. It’s like a burden of striving, pushing, or walking up a steep hill.

But always come back to being your own teacher, trying to understand how you are – understanding if your effort is draining, contracting, stressful – or if it is supportive, easeful, and nourishing. Over time, we learn what is nourishing and supportive. We learn how good it is to make a certain kind of mindful effort that it becomes more and more our home. The effort to be present becomes more and more second nature. We can settle, and be in the groove of being present.

I hope that you can practice with initiating effort and right endeavor today.

Tomorrow morning we will take the next step in these five talks on energy and effort. Thank you for being here.