

Pāramīs (5 of 10) Effort

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This is the fifth talk on the Ten Pāramīs. The *pāramīs* are perfections or qualities of character. One valuable purpose of the *pāramīs* is to bring our practice into the wholeness of our life.

Sometimes it's easy to focus just on meditation practice and to hear the teachings of Buddhism through the vantage point of how they relate to our meditation. For some people, Buddhism is mostly a meditation practice, and that's fine. Meditation is fantastically useful. But we have the opportunity to expand our practice to include our whole life.

In fact, one of the turning points for me in my own practice was when I was meditating for forty minutes twice a day, morning and evening. It was very meaningful for me to sit that way. I had a feeling of integrity, authenticity, and wholeness that I had not been familiar with before in my life. Then one day I asked, "Why do I have those feelings of wholeness, integrity, and authenticity only in meditation? Isn't the line between meditation and non-meditation kind of an arbitrary line? Why don't I have those qualities in my life as well?" That was the beginning of the expansion of my practice into my life.

For years really, I would say the inspiration to deepen and engage in Buddhism more and more – which meant going to live and practice in monasteries – was not so much to go deep in meditation, but to find a way to expand what was happening in meditation into my daily life. The aspiration wasn't so much to become a Buddhist as it was to allow the goodness, integrity, wholeness, and freedom that I was discovering in meditation to exist in my whole life, everywhere I went. In this way, the *paramis* are part of the whole life endeavor of Buddhist practice.

Now we come to the fifth quality, which is *virīya* in Pali. It is generally translated into English as "effort". "Effort" is maybe a compromise word, or a middle-way word for all the different ways it has been translated into English.

I'll explain that as I go along here. "*Virīya*" has an interesting etymology in Pali and Indian languages. It comes from the word "hero". "Hero" has connotations of heroic effort. I'm very aware that for English speaking audiences, especially in the United States, because of cultural and sociological conditioning we have, the word "effort" can have the wrong connotations. It can feel like excessive work, or striving, or pushing – too much involvement of self in it. If we talk about heroic effort, it's even worse for some people.

Yesterday I talked with a friend of mine about how the word "*virīya*" connects to "*heroic*." She pointed out that a lot of people who have been going to work day in and day out for years without being seen as heroes are now considered to be heroes. People in the medical professions and first responders are working in the forefront of the COVID-19 epidemic. They are working in the hospitals and putting their own lives at risk, some of them actually dying. We really appreciate their heroic effort in what they're doing there. So the word "*virīya*" – heroic effort – has something of this connotation.

There is, in fact, a heroic aspect – a tremendous effort – that can go into deciding to not just do some meditation practice, but to be very careful about the kind of effort we make, and to make this practice fill our whole being and our lives. We take in the full potential of meditation and see that it is not only about stress reduction, or relaxing, or being open and peaceful. This is a practice of freedom that's meant to be total and full, and then expand outwards in circles beyond us into the world itself.

The Buddha was heroic in his efforts to teach and practice. Imagine, he didn't have any manual, book, teachers, or AudioDharma in order to learn something about meditation and practice. He had no one to practice with for what he was going to discover – namely, his freedom. He talked about going against the current of popular culture of his time in what he was doing. And he discovered something. He discovered the psychological heart-depth of freedom, of release, of goodness, of the *paramis* – a full flowering of the human potential in a spiritual way. Was he heroic in doing that? And are we the recipients of that heroic effort? Maybe.

As a *parami*, effort follows wisdom. Wisdom is the protection for effort. The idea is to have wise effort. In Buddhism the idea of wise effort is very simple: “to avoid effort that is unwholesome or unskillful, and to engage in effort that is wholesome or skillful.” When I translate this into modern English, it means to avoid the effort that is not helpful, but engage in the effort that is helpful.

Now how do we know what effort is helpful and what is not helpful? I've seen in myself and also in people I've talked to that there is a strong tendency to have a singular definition or understanding of what effort is, and then measure everything against that one idea.

But in fact, effort is something that changes all day long. The amount of energy we apply to what we do, to the endeavors we're involved in, is quite variable. We are constantly adjusting and changing the energy level that we're putting in. In a sense, for Buddhist practice, there's never going to be a final, perfect, on-the-mark effort and energy level.

We're always adjusting and changing throughout the days, weeks, months, years. We are always finding the right effort. Part of helpful effort is finding the right effort, which becomes second nature and is not so self-conscious. In the same way, someone riding a bicycle is constantly changing the amount of energy they apply to making effort, whether they are going uphill or downhill, whatever's going on. For a good bicyclist it is second nature to adjust and change. The same way with Buddhist practice. It becomes second nature to know when to make a very strong effort and when to make almost no effort at all, and everything in between.

The word “energy” is sometimes a very nice translation of *vīriya*. But *energy* does not say anything about what we're doing. *Vīriya*, right effort, also has an implication of knowing *what* to do – the particular endeavor that we're engaged in. The Eightfold Path factor is right endeavoring. The Buddha says something like, If you take a piece of gravel or a rock, no matter how hard you squeeze it, you will not get oil out of it. You have to squeeze an olive, and then you'll get oil. Making a lot of effort for the wrong thing is not helpful.

So what is the helpful thing to do? As I said, this comes from wisdom. Wisdom teaches us how not to be harmful, how not to add stress, how to understand where freedom is, where letting go of clinging is, where letting go of selfishness and self-consciousness is. Wisdom teaches us to engage in the effort to keep opening to a way of working and being in the world that doesn't have a lot of selfishness or a lot of self-consciousness, self-preoccupation, or self-measuring, in positive and negative ways. To engage in effort that's not greedy, pushing, or striving – but still, to engage, to make effort.

But what is the effort we make? There are so many different kinds of endeavors. One of the most powerful endeavors we can do is the continuity of simply inclining ourselves towards freedom – the teachings and practices of freedom that Buddhism is about. The difference between someone living an ordinary household life and work and someone living in a Buddhist monastery is not so much that the people in the monastery have lots more time to practice, but rather that the context of the monastery puts them in the inclination to think in dharmic ways throughout the day, and reminds them of the value and the possibility of freedom.

Living a life where we're simply inclining throughout the day towards freedom, the Dharma, kindness, and mindfulness doesn't take a lot of effort when we're constantly there and being reminded. It doesn't necessarily require a lot of self-conscious effort. We just need to be reminded over and over and over again.

That's one example of effort. Exactly what that heroic effort is changes, but it's supposed to be wise effort. The more we become wise by learning a lot from the fourth *parami*, the more the efforts we make are onward leading or liberating – and are our delight. We are just so happy. I don't know if it's reasonable to say this, but sometimes the effort feels like play. It feels as if we are in the playground of the Dharma. There's a lot of energy put into it, but it's energy of play rather than the energy that obstructs, or strains, or gets tight or exhausting.

I hope that you will consider your relationship to effort, including the ways in which the effort may point to what you know gets in the way of practice and is not helpful. Also, consider what you know about effort that is helpful and meaningful and maybe even a kind of play – something you delight in and enjoy, where it feels good to get in the flow of just doing it and being carried along.

May you make wise effort. Part of wise effort is to understand your relationship to effort and free it from all the ways in which effort is a hindrance.

Thank you very much.