

## Accomplishment in Diligence

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So here we are and it's moving towards the end of the fourth full day of our retreat and it feels very quiet in this room, in this hall. Yeah, it feels good. So, a few months ago I saw an online interview with a man who takes people into wild places in order to track animals, big animals, apex predators. Not in order to harm the animals, but in order to teach the people how to follow a path, in a way. How to be attuned to the signs an animal leaves as it moves so that they can gradually, so that the people can gradually learn to attune themselves to the animal's movements. And this man spoke in this interview about attending moment after moment to the terrain where he's tracking, noticing one clue at a time, one moment of knowing and presence at a time.

So I'm hoping that sounds familiar to you from our days here. And of course it reminded me of our practice where we attend to what's arising one moment at a time, being present, being right there for it. And so after the people who come on these retreats, they call them tracking retreats, after they've had many days of observing and learning from expert trackers, then they spend one session tracking on their own. And sometimes they spend a night out in these wild places by themselves, alone. And in order to do that they need to have developed a lot of sensitivity. A lot of sensitivity in order to follow the trail, follow the traces of what they're looking for.

So there has to be strong mindfulness, of course. And that has to be associated also with vigilance. That's my topic for today, vigilance. Being attuned to the possibility of danger as well as to any signs left by an animal as they slowly move following traces, sometimes very subtle traces. Diligence and vigilance. Vigilance and heedfulness are sort of synonyms.

They're essential. Both looking for the signs of what we want and for the signs of what maybe we'd prefer wasn't present right now. And something that this man tells the participants on

these retreats is, you'll have to teach yourself to follow the trail of that thing that's calling you. You'll have to teach yourself to follow the trail of that thing that's calling you. And when I heard that, I wrote it down. I was listening online, I stopped, and I wrote it down because it meant a lot to me.

How do we teach ourselves to follow the trail of what it is that is calling us? What is the thing that's calling you? The other day, in the first talk I gave on Monday, I asked, what is your deepest aspiration? And in the meetings that I've been having with some of you over these days, quite a few have shared with me the main things that you want to do with your life, what you hold most dear, and I've been really touched to hear those. It feels like a privilege to have those aspirations shared with me. It's an honor.

So yesterday Kirsten spoke really beautifully about right view, complete view. It's one of the qualities that this Sun Series speaks of as accomplishing, having us become accomplished in. And it's also the first factor of the Noble Eightfold Path, the path that these qualities prepare us to engage with, to be, to express. And Kirsten spoke of several aspects of Right View, of knowing the Four Noble Truths, really knowing them deeply, seeing the truth of conditionality, the way things arise and pass according to conditions. Knowing *anicca*, impermanence or inconstancy, and *anattā*, what we usually translate as not-self, the understanding that, you know, what we think of as self is conditioned and impermanent, not something that we can rely on. And when we're steeped in right view, how do we live our life?

Kirsten quoted the 7th century Zen Master's response to that. An appropriate response. An appropriate response. So what is it we need in order to allow the arising of the Eightfold Path within us? What supports us in following the trail of the thing that is calling us? How do we discern the appropriate response in any situation?

In our practice life on the cushion? In our wider practice life in daily life? How do we do that? And this Sun Series list, it suggests these qualities that we've been looking at this week as great supports for that. Wholesome aspirations, integrity or wholeness, right view, and today's quality diligence, excuse me, heedfulness. And we'll be hearing a couple more as the days go by.

I really loved the metaphor Gil used about playing music the other day when he was speaking about self-accomplishment and self. We are the musician and our aspirations can be the instrument. The Noble Eightfold Path is the music that we play. And I see all these qualities that we're speaking about this week as aspects of the skill that we need in order to play the music well, in order for there to be harmony, in order for it to be in tune. And diligence and heedfulness or vigilance are intrinsically part of the picture whenever we talk about our

practice, whenever we talk about mindfulness, whenever we speak about the application of energy or effort in any context in our lives, in our practices. And the Pāli word for this quality is *appamāda*.

*Appamāda*. I like the sound of it really a lot. It has a rhythm to it that feels like compatible, consistent with its meanings. Diligence, heedfulness, vigilance, *appamāda*. Another translation is conscientiousness. So it has that, you know, it has a feeling of, there's almost a courage to it. But there is a courage to it. Sometimes.

So this word, *appamāda*, it appears in the Buddhist texts, the early Buddhist texts, really often. And it's always pointed to as being a really important quality. Heedfulness or diligence, it gives power to any effort that we make and it helps us discern what is onward leading, that phrase. Onward leading. It keeps us moving in the direction the Dharma flows. If we want our practice to lead in the direction of freedom, of ending our suffering, then the effort that we make, it needs to be diligent, it needs to be heedful, both steady and discerning.

So *appamāda*, the word in Pāli, it's not *pamāda*. It's like the prefix *a*, as a prefix in Pāli is similar to the way it is used in English. The prefix *a*, it means without, not. Like rhythmic versus arrhythmic or symptomatic versus asymptomatic. So *appamāda*, *appamāda*, excuse me, *appamāda* is not *pamāda*. And *pamāda* means heedless or negligent.

It's the word used in the wording of the fifth precept, the fifth ethical precept, to refer to the effects of alcohol. Heedlessness, negligence, carelessness. So *appamāda* is heedful, it's diligent, it's prudent. And it's part of becoming more sensitive to our experience, noticing what's present in our minds, in our moods and attitudes, and discerning what's the most beneficial way to work with all that, with our minds. Maybe to allow and be curious, maybe to apply antidotes, maybe to bring kindness to the mind. Heedfulness brings care, it makes us conscientious.

Negligence, it has a quality of ignoring. Often ignoring what's important, ignoring the clues to where the path can unfold for us, and ignoring the ways we get sidetracked, the ways we get pulled into rumination, obsessive thinking, comparing ourselves to others or to some idea of perfection, all the ways we get stuck. And when there's negligence, there's a likelihood of something unfortunate. The opposite of that. *Appamāda*. There's a sense he can keep us safe.

Pays attention. Safe from what, then, you know? Safe from what is unskillful, what's unwholesome. Excuse me. Unskillful, unwholesome, what leads to *dukkha*, to craving, to all the things that that obstruct us on our path from falling into unhealthy habits and not notic-

ing the signs that we're on the wrong track. It gets us noticing.

So using the analogy of being a tracker in a wild place and applying that to our practice. If we're in a wild place, a wilderness, and we're hoping to see some beautiful wild creature, we don't just go crashing through the undergrowth, missing all the signs of its presence. We take it slow. And in order to attune ourselves to our inner environment, we begin with inviting that balance of alertness and ease that we point to so often. We point to it so often in giving meditation instructions that it might just go in one ear and out the other. But it's really important.

That's why we repeat it so often. We're alert to the clues of how to be with our minds and with our bodies. We can't really be receptive to what's occurring in our minds and bodies unless there's ease in the receptivity. There's tightness. We're not allowing, we're not allowing what's present really to be known, to come into awareness. We can't squeeze the signs of the deepening of our practice by straining, you know, by trying to get somewhere or to fix something.

And if we aren't alert, if we aren't awake, we won't notice those clues. We won't be curious about them. And if we think what's calling to us is somewhere else other than where we are, and we try to hurry to get there, then we bypass the signs that point to where it actually is. We miss the footprints of the deer, we miss that little bit of fur on the end of a branch that a fox lost as it loped by. Or maybe we see the fox fur and then we get kind of excited and then we lose the sense of ease that keeps us open to the next little clue that comes along. A clue to where the path is opening before us.

We need to be attuned. We need to be attentive. We need to take heed. A dictionary definition of vigilance is a state of keeping careful watch for possible danger or difficulties. And the word's root is the Latin for being awake. Being awake.

We want to be awake to those things that might cause difficulties, the presence of hindrances, you know, of craving, comparing. And we want to be vigilant not only, I think, to the presence of danger, those kinds of dangers, but also we want to keep a careful watch for what's beautiful, what's wholesome, what's showing up in our minds and hearts that has those qualities. We keep a watch on our whole inner life. Not like a cat, you know, watching a mouse hole tightly focused and waiting to pounce. More like moving patiently through a landscape with our eyes open to what is beautiful, what gives us joy, and also to, you know, where there might be rocks to step over, where there might be a hole we don't want to trip in, where there are tree branches around head height. We keep a careful watch so that we can see what might be needed in our practice at any time.

Maybe resting in awareness with a sense of well-being. Maybe inviting more relaxation. Maybe more effort. Maybe some care for ourselves. It's always different depending on the conditions and the path that we're walking. Like being a tracker in a wild area searching for signs of something shy, something that requires us to be attuned to the landscape of our search, heedful of where the path is to be found, vigilant about our inner state.

It's like that. Requires us to be mindful both about signs of danger and signs of where the onward leading path is, and diligent in finding those signs. There's a sutta in the numerical discourses where the Buddha describes, thank you very much, heavy, where the Buddha describes *appamāda* as being the one thing necessary to cultivate for success in this life. And the Buddha uses similes in a lot of his teachings. And in this sutta he uses similes to compare being heedful and diligent to several things. And one of them compares being diligent to the ridge pole of a building, you know, the central pole in a building that has rafters that converge in the center.

All the rafters are supported by the ridge pole, and if the ridge pole is removed, the structure will collapse. There are several other similes in this sutta, all pointing to how *appamāda* is really essential. It's the most essential mental quality to cultivate. And there's another sutta in the *Samyutta Nikāya*, the connected discourses, that includes this statement about this quality. "Whatever wholesome states there are, they are all rooted in diligence, converge upon diligence, and diligence is declared to be chief among them." That's a pretty strong statement.

They are all rooted in diligence, converge upon diligence, and diligence is declared to be chief among them. Does it mean that the other qualities are rooted in diligence, you know, that they converge upon it? What it means to me is that it must be present for wholesome states to be developed. It's like the ridge pole. It holds up the roof. So vigilance is about being awake.

It's about keeping watch often for danger. And diligence, which is I think a slightly different flavor of this quality, has a similar quality of being sensitive to what's going on, attending to signs left by the thing that is calling to us, that which is calling to us. The etymology of the English word diligence, it reaches back to the Latin, the Latin for to esteem much or to choose. To esteem much or to choose. So rather than danger, it seems like diligence is awake to the aspects of our mental activity or other action that are aligned with what we esteem, what we value, our aspirations. And it's pretty evident how important diligence is to anything that we try to accomplish, anything we try to complete in life.

And I see two aspects of diligence with the actions that we engage in. There's engaging in

those actions that spring from our deep aspirations, so making that choice, and then doing those with care as well. So there's care in choosing what to do, and then care in the doing of what we have chosen. This quality of taking care, of bringing a careful attention and a steady effort to our actions, it can be a way of attuning our whole lives to the path leading to freedom. There are so many things in life that we give effort to, and time. And to bring this wholehearted, careful attention to all the little things we do can make everything we do an expression of beauty, of the potential for freedom.

Everything we do in life has an effect on us and often an effect on others, those around us. And if we can bring a sense of steady care, of quiet watchfulness to our daily activities, what might be the effect of that, you know? What would it be like to pay attention to the way we greet the clerk at the post office in the same way as we give careful attention to closing the doors here at IRC? So first we teach ourselves to follow that which is calling us, to use the tracker's language. And diligence and vigilance, they keep us attuned to the signs of what we're tracking and the signs of where we might get off track. And we gradually become skilled in following the trail of that thing which is calling us.

I'm a bread baker sometimes. Every ten days or so I bake a couple of loaves of sourdough bread for our household. And there is diligence in every single step of the process. Just the initial choosing, choosing to make something healthy to eat, something that's wholesome. Choosing ingredients that are nutritious, wholesome, and taking care of the sourdough starter that leavens the bread, feeding it regularly, keeping it healthy. All this has to take place before I even start.

Then in the mixing of the dough, there's adding just enough warm water, just enough flour, just enough salt to encourage the growth of yeast. Not too slow, not too fast. And then there's controlling the temperature and the moisture content of the dough, you know, handling the dough in very specific, particular kind of way to encourage strength in it, but not toughness. Lots of things to look at. Feeling with my hands whether it's ready to shape for the final rising, whether it has springiness but isn't completely full of air, which would mean I'd left it too long. And then there's a delicate matter of shaping the loaves while trying to preserve the springiness, not to deflate it.

Lighting the oven in time for it to be hot when the dough is ready. Giving it the right temperature. Then there's a very delicate process of turning the dough into the pans, making cuts in the surface so that it can expand once it goes in the oven. Baking for the right amount of time. Lots and lots of intermediate steps. And if I've taken care with each step and watched the way the dough is reacting to each addition and each manipulation, handled it with the

right balance of strength and gentleness, and given it the time and the temperature that it needs, but not too much, then the bread tastes good.

It's wholesome. It's nutritious. And sometimes I'm negligent in one step or another. There's too much water and it's flabby and never develops strength or too little and the texture is tight and heavy. Too much salt will kill the yeast. If the dough doesn't rise enough, it will be dense.

And if it rises too much, it will collapse. So the way we learn to bake good bread is by making not very good bread many times. And I think maybe you can see a parallel with other things that we do. The way we improve that not very good bread is by becoming attuned to the needs of the dough at each step of the process. There are many, many steps in the process, many more than I, and I know that was a long list, and there are many more than that. What does the dough need from me right now?

That's a question. What does it need from me right now? Sometimes it needs to be left alone, and sometimes it needs to be manipulated a little bit. Might need warmth, might need more coolness. And it's a little different at different stages in the process, and it's a little different in different seasons of the year. And diligence is making the effort to be attuned to what supports each step depending on the conditions present.

And vigilance is seeing and avoiding the pitfalls that can arise. I could make a kind of a comparison with each step and a kind of aspect of our practice, but I'll leave that to your imagination. Sometimes in our meditation practice, if we're feeling discouraged or disconnected from it for some reason, we might not see so clearly, you know, the downside of just giving up, you know, letting the dough sit there in the bowl and just forgetting about it. We might neglect our practice. Maybe it seems dry and tedious. Maybe we don't feel like we're getting anywhere.

We're having the same thoughts day after day. We're always restless or our knees or backs hurt, etc. Or maybe it's relatively calm and relaxing but we're feeling a little bit complacent, not motivated to go deeper. And in those kinds of conditions we can't count on our initial desire, you know, our aspiration for practice to carry us through, to keep us going. Desire without diligence supporting it is not likely to get us through. It's not going to last that long.

And I think if we've been practicing for any length of time, meaning from 15 minutes to 37 years, we know there will be times that we'd rather not sit, or times we don't feel enthusiastic about staying put, when our intention to stay present just seems to disappear, to go away. Negligence, when that's operating, it ignores complacency. It doesn't investigate boredom.

It doesn't question our mental shenanigans. All these ways of trying to resist what we would really benefit from doing. But paying heed, you know, taking care, this quality of *appamāda*, *appamāda*, it asks us to investigate.

It recognizes the danger in complacency. It supports us in being steady and persistent. So we can't count on our initial enthusiasm to keep us going on the spiritual path. This doesn't any other endeavor in life. Our aspirations to engage with the Dharma, they need a constant source of support to get us through the inevitable challenging times in practice. We want to keep that quality of yes, if you remember, the quality of yes that Ajahn Suchito spoke about, alive in us.

So how do we find that yes within us? And I think calling on our aspiration, connecting with our deepest wishes for our life is really helpful in supporting the development of this yes, of this diligence, this vigilance. If we want to walk a path toward freedom, away from greed, hatred, and delusion, aligning our actions with freedom is really important. Staying close to our aspiration. Staying connected with our deepest wishes for ourselves. And letting them inspire us and keep us pointed in the direction we want to go.

I spoke on Monday about how I formally connect with my aspiration for practice by repeating a vow that I take almost every time that I sit for meditation practice. And that kind of formal connection to my aspiration, to one's aspiration, can be a really valuable support if that's, if it is. For some of us it's a really valuable support. You have to find your own way of continuing to be inspired by your aspiration, I think. Connecting with the care and reverence for the Dharma. If you feel that reverence for the Dharma, that's a great support.

Recalling how you've benefited from practice and letting that inspire you. When people we know, you know, family and friends, when they comment on changes that they've seen in us as a result of our engagement with the practice, I think that gives a little oomph to our dedication. And then if we need encouragement and guidance we can call on supportive friends, wise elders, seeing the fruits of diligent practice in models, mentors that we admire, that can build confidence, faith, and that supports being steady, being diligent. And any gladness and joy that we find in our practice, that can be a real source of inspiration, helping to build this quality of diligence. I never would have finished writing this talk without calling on this quality of diligence, I can tell you for sure. I really love this topic.

It's important to me. It's important in my life. And I actually asked Gil and Kirsten if I could talk about this one. But as I began to write about it, I could see that I really needed to do a lot more reading, a lot more contemplation, because loving the topic is not the same as being able to talk about it in a cogent way, in a way that's helpful to others. And I had some

misconceptions about what *appamāda* really pointed to. So writing wasn't coming easily for me.

And there is still a part of me that holds on to the idea that it should be easy. My brain doesn't work as well as it did when I was young. It doesn't work as well as it did five years ago, actually. And that has made this quality of diligence really a lot more essential to me. Because a lot of things that used to be easy for me are no longer easy. And one of those things is putting ideas together in a cogent way, in a way that can be helpful.

So I have to work harder and sometimes that means I have to keep going when I feel stuck. And something kind of wonderful that I've learned is that if I do that, if I'm doing something I know is useful, I know is beneficial, something in alignment with my values, but I feel stuck, if I just keep going, then that effort to keep going, it seems to draw to it more energy. And so when I keep going, this quality of *appamāda*, of persistence, of diligence, it kind of, it grows in me as a hard quality and it gives me the confidence that I can still find the path forward. The animal tracker I spoke of said the man who taught him to track, who was someone from a long line of trackers, told him once, I don't know where we're going, but I know exactly how to get there. I don't know where we're going, but I know exactly how to get there. If I keep following the signs that my subject, in this case, is leaving for me, I will eventually find the words.

I may not know exactly where I'm going, but I do know how to get there. So life, you know, as life moves along, things change. Our bodies change. Our minds change. Things that were easy to do and didn't seem to require a lot of determination, a lot of conscientiousness, they can become difficult as we age. And continuing to engage in what we really value in life will require more of us.

It will. If we haven't already cultivated this staying power that diligence and vigilance give us, this energy for staying steady with our effort, it might be difficult to do that later. So I really encourage you, if you're young and you haven't already developed this as something you can count on, start cultivating it now. So this, in its aspect of vigilance, this quality *appamāda*, it includes paying attention to where we're not acting skillfully and also making the determination to change that. That's part of it. I think all three of us, Gil, Kirsten and I, have all spoken about this word *kusala*, which is translated usually as skillful or wholesome.

So action that is *kusala* is action that's beneficial, that doesn't create harm for ourselves or others. And when there's vigilance, you know, we see when there's unskillfulness operating, it points it out if we're not being truthful with ourselves about something or not being truthful with others. Or perhaps we're self-short-tempered, self-centered with someone we care

about. Perhaps we're feeling kind of tempted to engage in some activity that we know isn't good for us, something unhealthy. And if vigilance is operating, we recognize the harmfulness and we can refrain. Like Rāhula, the Buddha's son who Kirsten spoke about yesterday, we contemplate our actions and we learn from the results.

We look at them. Will this likely be something that leads to benefit? Or will it likely lead to harm? And then as we're doing it, is this something that's likely to lead to benefit or is it likely to lead to harm? And then afterward we ask the same questions. Has it, did it, lead to benefit or harm?

And if we think something was leading to harm was going to, looks like it's going to, or it did, then we can make the effort to change, to refrain in future, and to continue in what leads to benefit, the opposite direction. And I think this aspect of vigilant is really important to emphasize that it doesn't mean then that we get down on ourselves, that we kick ourselves, that we, you know, punish ourselves if we feel like we've stepped off track. It's much more helpful to let our values and our aspirations for our life inspire us to be diligent. Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, an American monastic who's done a lot of translating and a lot of commentaries on the early Buddhist texts, has called *appamāda* the Dharma in a word. The Dharma in a word. I don't know if that's true, but I think of *appamāda* as a really encouraging word, for sure.

To me it says, You can do this. You can do this. Come on. Make an effort. Be steady. That's kind of the diligence aspect of it for me.

And it also says, take this seriously. Do it wisely. Do it ethically. Inviting the vigilance aspect. I don't believe that it works to whip ourselves into shape if we recognize we're engaged in something unhealthy, unkind, not so wise. Getting down on ourselves is just not very motivating in my experience.

I can recall being a kid and a teenager especially, and if my parents nagged me or criticized me harshly for behaviors that they disapproved of, often I would feel guilty. I'd feel like a bad person, but my reaction was usually some kind of defensiveness, anger at them, sulking. I might try to act differently, but the impetus wasn't strong. You know, the motivation would be just to avoid getting into trouble, to avoid being judged. It was superficial. I wasn't likely to persist in my efforts to be a better kid, a better kid, according to their lights.

And there was a really different result if I just saw the effects of my actions and felt that somehow they didn't really match up to how I wanted to live my life with my aspirations. Although I wouldn't have used that word back then for sure. So there was a little bit of vigilance working there. Seeing how my actions were not attuned to my values, and then the impulse to

do better would come from a deeper, truer place in me, not from some parental edict from the outside. Or if I was encouraged to continue when I did something that was good, that was helpful, like helping a neighbor with a chore or sending a thank you note to a relative for some present or something. Just that was much more effective in building the sense of continuing to do that, moving me in the direction of acting in that way in the future.

And I really believe that whether blame and shame, whether they come from within us or are imposed by someone from the outside, in either case they just stifle our spirit. And this spirit of the quality of *appamāda*, it comes from our spirit. So we don't want to stifle that. So what gives diligence its power, I believe, is when it arises from within as a kind of a calling, as a result of a movement of the heart and mind, as a result of an aspiration. That word again. We have to see the value of something.

We have to see it for ourselves to really care about it in order to be diligent in it. Being motivated by a sense of, you know, heavy kind of responsibility or by guilt or duty, it's just not going to do it for us. Whether those are self-generated or offered to us by someone else. If the driving force is guilt or self-judgment, some kind of shoulding, we talk about shoulding, applying shoulds to ourselves, when that fades, the motivation is likely to just disappear. But when our intention comes from a deeper place, you know, from our most sincere wishes for how we want to live, there's a kind of joy inherent in that. There's a warmth.

And that in itself encourages us to continue to be careful and to be steady in the way we approach our tasks, our paths. So if you think you might benefit from being more diligent, more vigilant, more heedful, conscientious, don't do it as a duty, you know? Don't do it just because the suttas say it's important or teachers say it's important. Find the motivation in your own heart, in your own heart and mind. Connect with what's inspiring. You know, the ways you've benefited or changed as a result of practice, the promise of liberation, the example of a respected mentor.

Find your motivation in what is actually inspiring to you in your life. So I asked on Monday, you know, what is your deepest aspiration, your deepest intention for your life? What are your most precious values? Let those move you to take more care, more care in how you do your Dharma practice life, and also more vigilant, more heedful about the effects of your actions, or the potential effects of your actions. Learning from our mistakes by being vigilant, you know, not beating ourselves up, but renewing our dedication to being mindful, to being kind, to using our growing discernment in the service of waking up. That's the way forward.

The last words of the Buddha, as recorded in the suttas, are usually translated into English as, all conditioned things are subject to decay. Strive on with heedfulness. And the word that's

translated as strive on is *sampāḍita*. *Sampāḍita*. And the word that we've been translating as accomplishment or success is *sampadā*. It's a very similar word. They sound similar.

A few years ago I was curious about that word *sampāḍita*, strive on, wondering if it was best translated as striving. Because for me the word strive has a kind of a sense of strain in it. So I asked Gil back then how he would translate the Buddha's words. And he confirmed that *sampāḍita* is the verb form related to *sampadā*, accomplishment. To accomplish or be successful in. So, Gil offered an alternative translation of the Buddha's reported words.

He said, whatever is created has the nature to pass away. Accomplish your task with diligence. Accomplish your task with diligence. That's what we're talking about today. Accomplishment and diligence. So think of the, cast your mind back to the tracker's words, you know, I don't know where we're going but I know exactly how to get there.

And there are so many ways of describing the goal of our practice, of insight practice. Enlightenment, liberation, full awakening, full realization, the end of suffering, *nibbāna*. We won't really know the destination until we get there, until we reach it. But I trust that we can know how to get there. The Buddha's final words to his followers, both monastics and lay people like us, after 40 years of teaching as he lay on the ground preparing to die, spoke to exactly that, walking the path steadily and carefully all the way to freedom. All the way to freedom.

May that be an inspiration to your practice here on this retreat and also going forward. May we all get there wherever there is. So, thank you for your practice. Thank you for your attention.