Pushing the Rock up the Hill?

Dharma talk by Diana Clark

July 27, 2026 at the Insight Meditation Center, Redwood City, CA

Good evening. Welcome. Hope you're all doing well.

I'd like to start this evening with a poem by Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer[1]. And then she kind of gives a little dharma talk in this poem. There are so many different threads and elements and themes. I'm just going to pull out a few and talk about them. But there's a way in which sometimes poetry points to experience differently than just dharma teachings or doctrine or something like that. It helps speak to the heart, or I don't know how it works exactly, but it's definitely different than just somebody up here talking.

So I have this idea like, someday when I grow up I'd love to be a poet that can convey something that's beautiful and meaningful. But until then, we have Rosemerry Trommer.

And this poem is called *Perhaps It Would Eventually Erode But...*. I love this kind of playfulness of the title. You know, not neat and tidy, a little bit with these ellipses at the end. I love it. Okay, here we go.

That rock that we have been pushing up the hill, that one that keeps rolling back down and we keep pushing back up. What if we stopped? We are not Sisyphus[2]. This rock is not a punishment. It's something we've chosen to push. Who knows why? I look at all the names we once carved into its sedimentary sides. How important I thought they were. Those names. How I've clung to labels. Who's right? Who's wrong? How I've cared about who's pushed harder and who's been slack. Now, all I want is to let the rock roll back to where it belongs, which is wherever it lands. And you and I could imagine walk unencumbered all the way to the top and walk and walk and never stop except to discover what our hands might do if for once they were no longer pushing.

This is a lovely poem. There's a lot here.

She references Sisyphus. Perhaps many of you know who this is. Perhaps you don't. In Greek mythology, Sisyphus is an individual who was condemned to push a rock uphill, and then the rock always rolled back down. And then he pushed it up, and then it went down, and then up, and down for eternity. This was his punishment, to do nothing but push this rock up the hill and then just to see all his effort go away as the rock rolled back down.

So I want to read the beginning of this poem again, which kind of describes this:

That rock that we have been pushing up the hill, that one that keeps rolling back down and we keep pushing back up. What if we stopped?

It's fascinating for me to read this because in the story of Sisyphus, which this feels like it is about, stopping is not even an option. And it's amazing how so often we don't even think that some of the stuff we are doing, we can stop. I'd like to unpack that a little bit in the talk tonight, but I'll start with this feeling of pushing this rock up the hill and then it comes back down, just to do it again.

In a minor way, I kind of have that feeling about doing the dishes. It seems like I do the dishes and then just soon enough, there's another set of dishes and I'm doing them again, right? It's not something that ever ends as long as people are eating on dishes, I guess.

But there's this way in which, not only with something mundane like doing the dishes, but maybe there's a way in which we just feel this pattern in general about so many things. And maybe we can't even necessarily point our finger to something. It's maybe just this sense of all this continual effort.

In this practice, we encourage a certain amount of effort. Taking time to meditate, just as we did earlier before I started speaking, or cultivating wholesome qualities to be able to discern, "Okay, this is helpful and this is not helpful," and to continue doing those things that are helpful and stop doing those things that aren't. This takes some effort to pay attention and not just follow our preferences, but to distinguish what's actually helpful for the life I want, for the world I want. This takes some effort. In some ways, it can feel like pushing up the hill, maybe not the rolling down part as much as just the pushing up.

Or maybe there's this way that it takes effort to learn to turn toward some of our difficulties, to turn toward what's uncomfortable. I talk about this a lot in my talks in many different ways. I'm not going to talk about it so much here, but just this recognition that nobody wants to feel uncomfortable. And we've created a society that really promotes this idea of just avoiding anything uncomfortable, or here are ten bazillion things you can do to distract yourself from anything that's uncomfortable.

Whereas this practice has this recognition like, "Well actually, the way forward is to stop avoiding and distracting and to meet things that are uncomfortable as best we can." As best we can. We don't have to jump into the most difficult. We don't have to tip into overwhelm or anything like that. It's maybe just to stop the avoiding, stop the distracting as much as we often do.

So in some ways, this poem points to a few different ways in which we can meet difficulty or effort.

Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer has this line, "We are not Sisyphus." She's pointing to a few things. One is maybe to ask ourselves this question: "Is this struggle that we're in the midst of avoidable? Is this effort that we're doing right now still necessary in the way that we are doing it?" Sometimes we're doing extra effort just because this is a pattern we have. I'll unpack that a little bit, but maybe the question is: "Why are we pushing this rock up the hill? What's underneath that? What's this movement that we find ourselves doing, this pattern?"

The poem is not saying, "Okay, just stop all effort." And the poem's not saying, "Just drop every burden or everything that feels too much like a rock going up the hill." That's not what's being pointed to here. Instead, what's being pointed to is, can we discern for ourselves? Can we evaluate? Can we examine and investigate some of the efforts that we do? Not all of them are the same. Sometimes they feel the same because they both have this quality of effort, but there can be some real differences.

So, one is that sometimes we're putting forth effort that's born out of care. We care about others. We care about ourselves. We care about the world. We care about a whole number of things. There's this idea that we want to take care of our bodies as they age and get sick, as bodies do. And this can be demanding through different seasons of our life, if we have injuries or things like this. This can be a real effort to just take care of the body.

But that's just one example. Maybe it takes effort to keep our commitments, to show up for others, which sometimes we find difficult or uncomfortable. But there's this way in which this type of effort has its foundation in care. It's a way that we're saying, "This is what matters for me. This is important for me. I want to pay attention to it. I want to attend to it. I'm going to stay engaged with this, even if it requires some effort and has some discomfort." So maybe that's one way in which what's really important to us provides the fuel for the effort of what might feel like pushing a rock up the hill. That's the first one, this effort that comes from care.

The second is that there are difficulties that are unavoidable. That's part of the bargain of the human experience. As I mentioned, these bodies just keep on aging. There's no stopping the aging. They get sick. They will continue to get sick. Not only ours, but the people that we love and care about. Loss is a part of this human experience. People we love will die. We will die. We will lose things that are really important and meaningful for us. There are no guarantees that we will keep them forever. Of course not.

So these types of difficulties can't be removed. And maybe this is like a rock that we're pushing up the hill in some kind of way that feels burdensome, but is there a way that we could meet them differently? It's unavoidable, but can we meet them differently instead of turning them into a rock that's going up the hill? Can it be, "Well, this is just the next thing that's being done, is being with this experience of aging, being with this experience of loss, the sadness, the grief."

Everybody has this grief, this loss. Can we be with it, honor it, respect it? Can we meet it with greater kindness?

Sometimes the reaction is, "Get away from me, grief. I don't want to have anything to do with you." Is there instead a way that we can honor our experience and say, "Yeah, there's real sadness here. Maybe it's loneliness. There's loneliness here." So, can we treat it with kindness? Can we soften any resistance we might be having? Can we diminish or even completely let go of any blame that we have for ourselves?

I've seen in some of my extended family members, if there's some illness, then often there's this underlying view like, "I'm failing. If I'm sick, it means I've done something wrong and there's something terribly wrong with the universe." Sometimes we can have this idea that if I'm sick, I must be failing. So can we not blame ourselves with some of these unavoidable difficulties that are just part of the human experience, and maybe even connect with other people that have them if that feels meaningful for us? No requirement.

So that's the second one. The first was effort through care. Second is difficulties that are unavoidable, but can we change our relationship to them? Can we meet them with some kindness, less blame, less resistance?

And then the third is some struggles that continue because we are feeding them. We're fueling them. We're doing something that we're often not even aware of that's causing these difficulties to persist. There's a way in which we are unknowingly keeping them around.

One way in which we might be feeding this struggle is by trying to prove our worth. We keep on working to establish the sense that, "Oh yeah, I'm worthy or I'm good enough." When I stopped this job that I had in corporate America and spent some time not working, that was a hard thing to do. And I imagine this is like when anybody retires. I didn't realize how much my self-worth was tied up with what I was doing professionally. And then when that went away, I was kind of like, "Well, do I matter if I'm not contributing in this kind of way or the way that I was used to?" So, in order to avoid those questions—"Do I matter if I'm not working?"—we just keep on working. Just keep on working. I know a number of people who have retired and then said, "Oh, just kidding. [Laughter] I realize I just really want to work." Not to say that everybody who goes back to work after retiring has this, but it can be that way. So one of the ways this struggle of always efforting continues is because we're feeding it with trying to prove our worth by how much we get done, maybe professionally or volunteering or whatever it might be.

Another way of feeding this struggle is that we might be defending an identity without even knowing it. There might be a way in which we have adopted this view about ourselves of, "Oh, I'm the one who gets things done. I'm the one who doesn't give up. I'm the one that is persistent and will push through everything. I'm the one that will take on the work of everybody

else just to make their lives easier. So, I'll take on extra burden, which means that I have to do a lot of this struggling." And I'm using sentences like, "I'm the one who has to work the hardest," but it's usually not that simple in our mind. It's a subtle view, maybe not even a complete sentence in our minds, but it shows up as a way that pushes this self to push the rock up the hill. This sense of identity, and any experiences that threaten this sense of "I'm the one who gets things done," feels really uncomfortable.

It can be confusing and disorienting if you've defined yourself a certain way and then all of a sudden that's not available. People who have sudden injuries and find themselves in the hospital, it's really confusing and disorienting. When I was a chaplain in the hospital and I would be visiting patients, part of the objective was to allow the patient to throw me out, because they don't get to throw out all the nurses and the therapists and all these different people that come visit them. Their sense of helplessness and this feeling of, "I used to be able to do this and now I can't," was profound. So as a chaplain, sometimes our role is for them to say, "Get out of here, I'm so mad, I don't want to talk to anybody." And we would say, "Okay, okay, that's perfectly fine," to give them a sense of agency. So there can be a way in which defending an identity, defending a view that we have about ourselves, is a way in which we perpetuate the struggle, this pushing the rock up the hill.

And then there's a third way in which we might be feeding this continual pushing of the rock up the hill, and that is because we're trying to control things. We want things to go a particular way. Not any old way, a particular way, because then that will be a source of lasting happiness for us. And I'm saying this with a smile because we never think of it that way. But there is this way we think, "Well okay, as soon as I..." I certainly had this, "As soon as I graduate." Okay, that graduation wasn't enough. "Okay, now as soon as I graduate here." Oh no, now I have to graduate over there. It gets a little crazy. Attain, achieve, it just can go on and on and on.

So this sense of trying to control an outcome, trying to make events unfold in a very particular way because then we'll be happy. Then we'll be able to relax. So maybe there's this way in which we put all this effort in because we don't like uncertainty, and so we're just trying to figure everything out and make it go a particular way just to make ourselves feel more comfortable, or to make other people feel more comfortable if we can say, "Oh yeah, I got it all figured out. Just follow me. I got it all figured out." So maybe the effort continues just because we really don't want to see where this rock goes if it were to roll down the hill. So we just keep on pushing it up.

So maybe there's this question that we could ask ourselves when we find that there's a lot of efforting happening. We could ask not only, "Should I make an effort?" I mean, to be human is to mean that we're doing activities or effort in some kind of way, whether it's literally with the body or with the mind thinking. But we could ask, "What is this effort serving? What's fueling it?

What's underneath it? Does it bring more freedom or does it bring some contraction? Does it bring a sense of, 'Here I go again, here we go, here we go?'"

And maybe I'll just say that effort that comes from caring has this inner feeling of steadiness, patience, flexibility, as opposed to this sense of, "No, it has to be this way, dang it." If it's coming from care, there's this recognition like, "Oh yeah, okay, maybe to go this other way then, rather than just striving, striving." So we could ask, when we find ourselves putting out a lot of effort, "Does this effort feel like care, something that's coming from the heart and is connected to what matters to us? Or is it conquest, like we're going to figure this out, we're going to get this done, or I'm going to make sure that everybody sees that I'm the hard worker?"

So there's a way in which there can be this connection between our identity—who we think we are, our view of ourselves, how we want others to view us—that is connected to effort. And in this poem, Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer writes, "I look at all the names we once carved into its sedimentary sides." Some of you may know that sedimentary rocks are ones that are built up by layers. So there's this way that we have a first layer of, "Oh yeah, I got a lot of positive feedback when I worked hard doing that. Oh, I got a raise when I worked hard doing that effort." And then it just starts to become more and more who we are. And then there's this way that without realizing it, just the activity of pushing this rock up the hill is creating the pusher. The one who pushes. They arise together. So pushing is happening by a pusher. And the pusher is me, right? The one that we think we are sometimes: "I'm the one that puts forth this effort." And so we don't want to stop the pushing because the sense of the pusher goes away.

And I know this is weird language. And I know that this might feel a little bit awkward, but this is so much what this practice points to, is how our activities, the way that we're showing up in the world, kind of defines who we are in that moment. And then we do something else and it defines who we are in that moment. We tend to think there's just one constant self in the middle that just does lots of things. But that's not actually what's happening. And you don't have to believe me about this. The invitation is to just look: where is this center? Where is this essence, this core that just does things? Instead, you just find one that pushes, one that loves, one that cares, one that gives dharma talks, one that hears dharma talks.

So when there's this sense of being the pusher, then we have to push. This is what a pusher does. This is what a rock mover does. They move rocks.

So when we find that we have a lot of effort, we can ask, "Is there a sense of self that's getting created here or getting expressed?" Because it can be the opposite too. I'm talking about pushing a rock up the hill, but it can be like, "Oh yeah, I'm the one that doesn't finish projects. Oh, I'm the one that disappointed my parents, the educational system, my boss, whomever,

because I don't put effort in." Or "I'm the one who..." and then just fill in the blank. It's amazing how these views about ourselves really have an impact without our even noticing.

So not only is the pushing supported by this idea that, "Okay, there's a me here who does this type of activity," but it's also supported by comparing ourselves to others. "Oh, that person was working harder. Oh, that person, what a slacker." I know that when I was in corporate America, I worked in multidisciplinary teams, these big teams, and we were all from different disciplines and we had to work together to create things. And all it took was one team member to be really gung-ho and work a lot, late in the night. Then the rest of us are like, "Oh, I don't want to be the slacker here. Okay, then I'll answer those emails at night. I'll do this extra thing." And it's amazing how effective this is, right? Corporate America loves this because then the productivity starts to go up and up and up because nobody wants to be left behind. And then everybody's stressed. And yeah, you don't need me to tell you about this for many of you.

So there's this way in which this measuring how we're doing compared to others keeps that rock important somehow. We're never questioning, "Should this rock even go up the hill?" We're just comparing ourselves to others.

So freedom begins with seeing. "Oh, I may not need to continue pushing this rock up the hill. Oh, does this rock really need to be up the hill?" Sometimes we don't even ask these questions because we don't even have this sense that there could be anything else. So freedom is seeing, a recognition of possibility. But it requires seeing first, and that's part of what meditation practice helps us with. It helps calm the body and the mind so that we can start to see things that we can't see when we're so busy doing whatever it is that we're doing.

Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer writes, "Now, all I want is to let the rock roll back to where it belongs, which is wherever it lands." I love this idea. Just let it roll back and let's just see where it goes. Instead of saying, "Okay, I'm going to force it to be in a particular way. I'll create a little chute for it and measure the aerodynamics," and all this kind of stuff. "No, just stop pushing and see what happens."

And remember at the beginning of the talk I discussed three different types of effort. So it's not all effort that we just completely stop, and that's part of this art of practice, the skill of being human, having a full life, is to know which one of these efforts it is. But there's this way that once the pushing stops, then the rock moves according to conditions. Of course it moves according to conditions. Everything happens according to conditions. We're not controlling it. We're maybe influencing some of the conditions, but we're not influencing all of them. The pushing stops. The rock moves according to conditions, and where the rock goes doesn't need to be managed. We might even say it can't be managed because it's according to conditions.

This doesn't mean if we stop pushing that all of a sudden we're going to feel bliss and happy and everything's going to be wonderful. I mean, there might still be some difficult feelings. There might still be some grief or some anger or some uncertainty. But there can be letting go of the pushing. And the letting go means that we stop feeding this struggle. Letting go means that we're just stopping adding force, using our life energy on some impossible projects, trying to control things that we can't control, trying to stop things from changing. So letting go means that we just stop demanding a particular outcome.

And this openness, this stopping demanding a particular outcome, this way of allowing the consequences of our letting go of the pushing to just unfold, is a certain amount of openness. And this openness is the doorway to more freedom. It's the doorway to more peace, the doorway to more ease. So letting go doesn't end all movement or end all participation or anything like this. Instead, the movement is no longer organized around force, struggle, or things that are difficult. Again, difficulties don't magically suddenly stop. But maybe there's walking rather than pushing. Maybe there's exploring rather than proving something. Maybe there's responding rather than controlling, or trying to control anyway.

Because Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer ends this poem with, "...except to discover what our hands might do if for once they were no longer pushing." And this is something interesting because often we don't want to stop pushing because we don't know what's going to happen when we stop. You will never know what's going to happen when you stop until you stop. There's a little bit of confidence needed here. A little bit of faith. A little bit of leaping maybe. I know this for myself, I've hesitated to do so many things in my life because I felt like, "Well, I'm not sure how it's going to turn out." And now I'm reflecting back and thinking, "Maybe I should have just jumped anyway." Maybe not, I don't have regrets so much, but I just see how there's this hesitation because I don't really know what's going to happen if I let go of something or other. I have done some really big letting goes, but maybe there were some other ones that would have been helpful.

So this freedom of not knowing. The freedom is not thinking that you need to know, because you don't know. The version of you that gets created that moment that there's no longer pushing is different than the you that was pushing. So you can't actually know. It's impossible. It's going to happen when you stop. You can't know.

So I'd like to read this poem again. *Perhaps It Would Eventually Erode But...* by Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer.

That rock that we have been pushing up the hill, that one that keeps rolling back down and we keep pushing back up. What if we stopped? We are not Sisyphus. This rock is not a punishment. It's something we've chosen to push. Who knows why? I look at all the names we once carved

into its sedimentary sides. How important I thought they were. Those names. How I've clung to labels. Who's right? Who's wrong? How I've cared about who's pushed harder and who's been slack. Now, all I want is to let the rock roll back to where it belongs, which is wherever it lands. And you and I could imagine walk unencumbered all the way to the top and walk and walk and never stop except to discover what our hands might do if for once they were no longer pushing.

So if you find yourself doing some effort, maybe it can be an opportunity to just ask, "What kind of difficulty is this? What kind of effort is this that I'm putting forth? Is this something that supports greater freedom? Is this something born from care? Is this something that maybe isn't necessary, but I'm doing it anyway? It's part of a pattern and I have this pattern that's associated with my identity." Just an invitation for some exploration. You don't need to find the answers. The point is to just question.

And I'll end there and open it up for some questions. Thank you.

Q&A

Question: So all of this is about effort that doesn't do us much good. Can you talk about right effort[3]?

Diana Clark: Yeah. So right effort, the way it's classically defined, is a little bit what I pointed to earlier. It is this recognition: what leads to freedom and what doesn't? And can we cultivate those things that do and not cultivate those things that don't? So if you discover that you're doing something that doesn't lead to freedom, to abandon it is kind of the instruction, and to cultivate those things that do. So that's right effort.

But that might not be what you asked. There's another way in which effort gets talked about, and it's not right effort technically; it's just effort in general. And that is like a stringed instrument: when you hit the string, you can hear if it's in tune or not. And so you might need to—you can tell I don't play one of these instruments—you have to do something with a doohickey [Laughter] and then it changes whether it's in tune or not. And the point is not that you'll get it tuned and then it'll be perfectly in tune forever. In fact, the art of practice is just hearing, "Oh, it's a little out of tune, maybe too much effort or not enough effort." So is that helpful, Phil?

Questioner: Yeah.

Diana Clark: Okay. So, thank you for your practice and I wish you a wonderful rest of the evening and safe travels home. Thank you.

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1. **Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer:** An American poet whose work often explores themes of mindfulness, transformation, and finding beauty in ordinary moments. ↩
2. **Sisyphus:** In Greek mythology, Sisyphus was the king of Ephyra, punished for cheating death by being forced to roll an immense boulder up a hill only for it to roll down every time it neared the top, repeating this action for eternity. ↩
3. **Right Effort (Sammā Vāyāma):** The sixth element of the Noble Eightfold Path, involving the effort to prevent unwholesome states of mind from arising, abandon existing unwholesome states, arouse wholesome states, and maintain and perfect wholesome states. ↩

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