Wise and Balanced Effort

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 1:01:57

At one point, someone asked the Buddha to describe his teaching in brief. And he said, "Nothing is worth clinging to."

So what does this mean? Why would that be a succinct summary of the Buddha's teachings?

When we think about what clinging is—holding on to something, trying to stop something—when we think about clinging in our experience, it usually means that there's something we want to try to keep the way it is. It's like, "This is good this way. I think I'll keep it like this." Or we're clinging to some view or vision or idea of how we'd like it to be, and so we're trying to arrange our world to fit that vision. Essentially, we are working against the natural flow of reality by clinging.

In a way, I think of clinging as both born out of a sense of dissatisfaction and resulting in dissatisfaction. We don't like things the way they are, so we want to arrange things to suit us. Or we want to hold on to something—"This, I'll take more of this, please." And that very holding on is acting against the natural tendency for things to fall away and fall apart in their ever-unceasing flow of change. So clinging is both born out of dissatisfaction with things as they are, and it results in dissatisfaction. Maybe not initially, maybe not obviously to us initially, but it does.

In fact, I think part of the reason why clinging is so tenacious for us—why we do this over and over again, why we have these habits and patterns of "I'm going to fix this, I'm going to get this, I'm going to have this, and then everything's going to be okay," and when it starts to fall apart, "Well, then I'll get this next thing and then I'll be okay again"—part of the reason we have this pattern is because when we do manage to control, to fix, to manipulate, to arrange things to be, even for just a moment, the way we'd like them to be, there is some sense of "Ah, I've figured it out." Even if just for a moment, I figured it out. So there's a little bit of what feels like satisfaction that comes when things come into an arrangement we particularly feel satisfied with.

But this kind of satisfaction is inherently not very long-lasting, not ultimately terribly satisfying, because however we've arranged things, however we've held on to things or fixed things, it will fall apart. And so we're in this cycle, and we think that we'll get satisfaction by getting what we want, getting rid of what we don't want, manipulating the world to be the way we'd like it to be. And then we know that will fall apart, and so then we try again. We think that happiness is to be able to arrange the world successively so that we get more and more moments of things we like and less and less moments of things we don't like. We think that's happiness. We think that's basically as good as it gets for us.

I think that's part of why this clinging, this pattern, is so pervasive for us—because we don't have the vision to see what an alternative would be. What would be another way to happiness?

The Buddha has a proposal for us: that it's actually the letting go of clinging that will lead to a deeper kind of happiness. A coming into alignment with the way things are. A coming into alignment with the fact that things change, that there is this inherent quality of unsatisfactoriness to all experience. There's no experience we can have that will ultimately satisfy us forever. There's that kind of inherent unsatisfactoriness to experience. So the Buddha suggests coming into alignment with these truths, letting go of the clinging. This is a deeper kind of happiness that is possible for us, but it takes a really fundamental shift of our worldview to understand what this really means.

The term "let go" does appeal to us at times. There can be a nice sense thinking about it—"Oh, let go. Yes, I'll let go." But sometimes it's not so easy to let go of habits and patterns that have built up. We've practiced these patterns of getting what we want, getting rid of what we don't want, for our whole lives, starting from the moment we're born. But they're not ingrained. They're not hardwired. It is possible to change these patterns. It's not easy, and it does take this fundamental shift of worldview. And it takes energy, effort, and courage to make this shift.

So this is what I'd like to talk about this evening: energy and effort. How we engage with this practice. These two qualities are very intimately connected, very closely related, but they are slightly different, and I hope to be able to clarify the distinction between energy and effort.

the Buddhist texts, the Pali term is *viriya*, usually translated as energy, sometimes as zeal—this kind of movement to engage. This is what this energy is.

In its barest form, it's understood to be a neutral quality. It's the same quality that underlies engagement with cultivating wholesome qualities like concentration or self-discipline or kindness, as it is a quality that would be associated with engaging in acts of aggression or violence. There's just this energetic movement of expression that comes when we act and engage. So from one side of things, this *viriya*, this quality of energy, is simply a neutral quality.

But in terms of our practice, there are specific associations with energy that help us direct that energy in a skillful direction. In one of the Buddha's many lists, the quality of energy is found in a particular place—between wisdom and patience. I think this is interesting, because it actually points to an important teaching: in this particular list, each quality preceding the next supports the development of the next quality. So in this case, wisdom supports the development of energy.

What is wisdom? If wisdom is the ground out of which this energy that will support our practice grows, what is this wisdom? There are several different ways wisdom is described in the Buddhist texts, the suttas, the words of the Buddha. I'll talk about just a couple of ways this evening to point to some particular aspects I want to clarify around energy and effort.

One of the ways wisdom is defined is as understanding what is helpful, skillful, wholesome with respect to moving towards happiness and away from suffering—understanding what's skillful in terms of letting go of suffering, and understanding what is unskillful. Being very clear about what helps us and what doesn't help us.

The term suffering is quite broad. There are quite a few of you who haven't sat many retreats, so I want to take a moment to describe this term usually translated as suffering—the term *dukkha*. It's often simply translated as suffering, and that's how we speak about it. But when we use that term in English, it's a little intense. We don't necessarily think, "Oh, I'm suffering," when we're a little bit frustrated. The food that was offered tonight may not have suited your digestion. It may not feel so much like suffering—maybe just a little bit of frustration. We don't normally think, "Oh, I'm suffering because I'm frustrated they didn't have rice, they had something else." We don't think of that as suffering. But it is this quality of *dukkha*.

Dukkha has a very broad range of meanings. It can mean just a subtle sense of dissatisfaction, a subtle sense that things aren't quite right. The roots of that word tell us something important: the first part, *du*, means something like "bad," and *kha* refers to the center of a wheel—the space in the middle where the axle would go through. So basically, if you have a bad empty space in the middle of a wheel, what is your ride going to be like? Maybe the hole for the axle is too small, so there's a lot of friction. Or maybe it's a little off-center, so there's a wobbly feeling. Or maybe it's too loose, so the wheel falls off altogether and you crash and burn. This term *dukkha* covers the entire range—from just feeling slightly off to major suffering.

This is the problem the Buddha was trying to solve: Is it possible to be free of this feeling that things are just off all the time? It's more pervasive than we really recognize, this feeling that if only we had a little more of that, if only we could get rid of a little more of this. Again, our pattern of manipulating our environment masks this sense of dissatisfaction.

The skillful and unskillful—this aspect of wisdom—are intimately connected with what supports us in finding a way out of this dissatisfaction, this off feeling, this suffering.

Another main definition of wisdom in the Buddhist texts is the Four Noble Truths. Understanding the Four Noble Truths isn't simply believing in didactic statements meant to be put out there and accepted. The Buddha suggested these Four Noble Truths—the truth of suffering, the truth of the cause of suffering, the truth of the end of suffering, and the truth of the path leading to the end of suffering—as things we need to engage with. This is where energy comes in. He didn't put these out there saying, "Just believe these." He said, "Engage with these." He associated an action with each of these truths.

He said, we need to understand suffering. We need to let go of the cause of suffering. We need to realize for ourselves the ending of suffering, and we need to cultivate the path leading to the ending of suffering.

So this is how wisdom and energy are intimately connected. This wisdom of the Buddha is not just a

wisdom meant to be believed—it's meant to be engaged with. The energy in our practice is energy directed towards a specific purpose. The spiritual faculty of energy has the purpose of awakening.

There's another definition of energy. Courage is sometimes used as another translation for this term, *viriy a*. I looked up the definition of courage, the English definition. I normally think of courage as bravery or something like that, but the definition I found really describes what we do here: the inner strength of heart to persevere in the face of difficulty. That is a lot of what we do here.

Energy and effort are very connected. We need energy, in a sense, to make effort. This is our normal way of thinking about energy. If I have energy, I can do things. If I have energy, I can go for a run. Once I go for a run, then I need to rest, allow my energy to come back. So we think of consuming energy when we make effort. That's our normal model about energy and effort—we have energy and then we can make effort; making effort uses up the energy and then we need to do something to replenish it. Take a rest. Have some food. Something like that.

We carry this model into our practice of how energy and effort are related. We feel like to make effort in the practice, we use up energy, and when our energy is used up, we can't practice anymore. That is one way it is true—energy is needed to make effort. But there's also another teaching around this, which turns the whole thing on its head: making effort produces energy. When we make effort wisely, it produces a balanced kind of energy. A balanced effort will produce a balanced energy.

This turns things on its head. Is there a way that we can envision making effort such that energy isn't consumed but actually produced? One of the ways I understand how this works is that clinging—this process of holding on, manipulating, trying to arrange our world to be just the way we want it to be—takes a lot of energy. When in this practice we turn to attend to the clinging and the clinging begins to let go, energy gets freed up. I think this is one way that skillful, balanced effort produces energy.

I'd like to talk about effort, this wise effort, this balanced effort, from the perspective first of wise effort. There's a whole teaching that the Buddha offers about making effort in the practice, and this teaching about right effort, wise effort, takes as its foundation the same understanding of what's skillful and unskillful, what's wholesome and unwholesome.

The simplest way of describing wholesome mind states is that they are those states based in non-greed, non-aversion, non-delusion. Or to put it more positively: kindness, generosity, and wisdom. States based in kindness, generosity, and wisdom will tend to lead us towards happiness and away from suffering. Unwholesome, unskillful states are those based in greed, in aversion, in delusion—states like irritation, frustration, restlessness, boredom, laziness, smugness, wanting, pride. All of these states of mind lead us to this dukkha, this off feeling.

Right effort is said to be four kinds of effort that the Buddha put forth. He said there's the effort we need to make to avoid unwholesome states that have not yet come up in our minds—to avoid unwholesome states

that have not yet arisen. Then there's the effort to abandon or let go of unwholesome states that have come up in our minds—to abandon unwholesome states that have arisen. On the other side, there's the effort to cultivate wholesome states that have not yet come up, and the effort to maintain wholesome states that have arisen.

You see that the whole understanding around wise effort requires that we understand what wholesome and unwholesome states of mind are.

This can sound somewhat obscure—the effort to avoid unwholesome states that have not arisen, the effort to abandon unwholesome states that have arisen. So I'm going to go through each of these so that we can get a sense of what it means to practice with each of these right efforts.

The first one is the effort to avoid unwholesome states that have not yet arisen. What does that mean? How do we avoid an unwholesome state that's not here yet? Basically, this is about looking at causes and conditions that land us in suffering, learning from our experience. We see over the course of looking at our experience that in certain conditions, certain situations, we end up struggling, we end up suffering a lot. So the practice around this kind of right effort is to notice those conditions and learn how to navigate around them—to avoid the conditions that lead us into suffering.

We have to be careful with this teaching because even just the term "avoiding" can have a flavor of aversion to us. We can think of it as meaning to push something away, to get averse and push something away so that we don't have to experience some kind of suffering. That is not what's being talked about here.

This term for avoiding can have some subtle meanings to it, though it can also be quite obvious. There's that teaching, a kind of autobiography in five chapters. Some of you may have heard this.

Chapter one: I walk down a street. There's a big hole in the street. I don't see it. I fall in. It takes me a long time to get out.

Chapter two: I walk down the street. There's a big hole in the street. I see it, and I fall in. It takes me a long time to get out.

Chapter three: I walk down the street. There's a big hole in the street. I see it. I think about avoiding it, but I fall in. I get out quickly.

Chapter four: I walk down the street. There's a big hole in the street. I walk around the hole.

Chapter five: I walk down another street.

This is learning from experience. We can learn to avoid the situations that land us in trouble. Sometimes it's that obvious. Other times there's a little bit more subtlety to it.

For instance, some of you may have noticed that when you're in line for lunch or dinner, there may be

some comparing mind going on about what other people are doing—how much food they're taking, what they're putting on their plate, how they're putting it on their plate. At first glance, we might not even notice. We might not even see that this is suffering. It's like walking down the street and just falling in the hole. We just end up lost in comparing, and at some point, twenty minutes later, it's like, "Oh yeah, mindfulness—what's that?"

Other times we actually do begin to see this comparing mind and we sense, "This is not so helpful." As we begin to see that these kinds of states of mind are not so helpful, we might want to find ways to avoid the situations that create them.

At first glance we might think, "Okay, if standing in line watching people take food is causing this judgment, maybe what I do is wait. I sit in the hall for another fifteen minutes until there's nobody in the line, and then I miss out on the judgment." That's one way of working with it. But you might want to check in as to whether that particular way of exploring this has a little bit of aversion to the comparing mind itself.

Another way to explore this might be to really be mindful of what's happening for you in the line—noticing where this comparing comes out of. You see somebody taking a big scoop of something. What happens there?

Maybe it immediately goes to "they shouldn't do that," but see if you can see what's happening there. It might be something like a little bit of fear—there's not going to be enough for me. A little bit of fear that leads to some thinking, that leads to this judgment.

So if we can begin to see that it's not just the condition of standing in the line that's creating the suffering, it's kind of a more moment-to-moment process happening in our minds out of which this judgment is coming—then we can begin to use some tools of mindfulness to help ourselves not go down that path.

One way to explore this is something called guarding the sense doors. It's not putting blinders on, but using mindfulness to really recognize what's happening in this moment. Seeing is happening. Seeing is happening in this moment. Actually, this is one tool that Joseph Goldstein offers a lot on his retreats. He says when you go into the dining hall, if you see there's a lot of judgment happening, just as soon as you get in there, start to notice: seeing is happening, seeing is happening. That's a kind of way of guarding that sense door from ending up hooking into this chain of thinking that ends up proliferating into a pattern that leads to suffering.

I tried this for myself. I was finding myself judging in the dining room, and I went in and just started noting seeing—using that "seeing is happening, seeing is happening." And it was amazing. It stopped there. It didn't leap into subsequent unwholesome states of mind.

The second kind of right effort is the effort to abandon, to let go of unwholesome states that have arisen. This means when we find ourselves caught in some kind of struggle, dissatisfaction, frustration, some

sense of offness—this dukkha—we make the effort to let go of it.

Now, this effort of letting go might have an active feeling to it. It might have a sense of, "Oh yes, I see this isn't so helpful to be engaging in this pattern. Maybe I can let go of it." We can kind of put it down a little bit.

The Buddha offers some tools for this active letting go. One thing he suggests is when we see ourselves caught in a pattern of unwholesome thought or mind state—if we find ourselves caught in anger or judging or comparing about a particular person—then see if we can replace the thoughts. Just actively use different thoughts in the mind. He actually suggests for fear and anger that replacing those thoughts with thoughts of metta will be helpful. This is one way that we can practice letting go of unwholesome states.

Now, this can't be done with an idea or an attitude of aversion towards the unwholesome states. It really has to be very neutral: "Okay, that's not so helpful. Let me try this. Can I let go of engaging in that thought pattern and try something else?"

Another way to work with actively letting go is to redirect the attention. I call this the "not now" practice. If you're finding yourself caught in some pattern that has an overwhelming quality—this happens to us a lot in meditation—you know, we find patterns and habits are so strong that sometimes they have much more momentum and strength than our mindfulness. When we try to bring mindfulness to some of these very powerful patterns, whether it's fear or anger or depression or loneliness, sometimes when the pattern is so strong, it can swamp the mindfulness. It's like the mindfulness just gets sucked into this black hole. "Where was I?" We just get completely lost.

So if you know that about a particular pattern, it can be really helpful to recognize that pattern coming up and think, "Okay, here's anger. Maybe I shouldn't even try to be mindful of this. I should turn my attention to something else in my experience."

I did this for quite a while around one particular pattern of anger. Just noticing when this person—it was one person I was angry at, and this particular anger just had a real hook to it. Every time this person came up in my mind, the anger started and just took off. So I began recognizing the moments when I was just starting to get angry and thinking, "Okay, not a good idea to put any kind of attention or energy in this at all. Don't try to be mindful of it. Just put my attention someplace else—into my feet." I tended to be walking when this would come up, so just feet on the ground, noticing the sensation, the contact. Kind of a "not now" to that anger. Not an aversive pushing away, but just recognizing it's not helpful to try to turn toward it right now.

I see you. I see that you've got an energy, a strong energy, and wanting to be seen. So for me, there was a kind of need to acknowledge that strong pattern, that strong habit with some kindness, and then redirecting the attention. This is another way of letting go of unwholesome states.

But often what's happening in our practice is that something's coming up, we can see it with mindfulness,

it's not that it's dragging us down, but it just doesn't really feel like much is happening. I remember at one retreat, this deep pattern of clinging was so clear to me. It was like I knew I was holding on. I even kind of had a sense of what I was holding on to. But I had no clue how to let go. I could see that—I'd let go if I could. It just wasn't possible.

In that time, it wasn't as if that feeling of suffering, that feeling of holding, that feeling of clinging was drowning my mindfulness. It just really wasn't pleasant. It was a really unpleasant place to be. I really wanted to let go, but I couldn't let go.

So in that case, a lot of what our practice is, is just bringing mindfulness to the experience. One of the ways I think of mindfulness working, particularly in this kind of sense—this is the "let it be" approach with mindfulness—is that as these difficult patterns and habits are playing themselves out, sometimes what mindfulness does, or the way mindfulness works, is kind of like this: we're driving a car a hundred miles an hour down the freeway. That's the momentum of whatever that pattern is—the anger, the frustration, the loneliness, the depression. It's the mind in that pattern, traveling really fast.

Often the way mindfulness functions is not by slamming on the brakes on this pattern, but by putting the car into neutral. You're going a hundred miles an hour down the freeway, you put the car into neutral, and the car doesn't come to a stop immediately, but it will come to a stop because you're no longer feeding it. You're no longer giving it gas.

It's very similar with the mindfulness practice. With this kind of balanced, kind attention, it's like disengaging the gears. It's taking the fuel out of the pattern so that it can come to a stop in its own time. And what seems to happen, at least in my experience, is that we disengage for a while, and then we see it and engage again. We're winding it up again. Oh—remember—and we disengage, and then engage, and disengage. This is our practice. This is a lot of our practice: to notice when we're engaged and when we're disengaged. And when we're disengaged, it does tend to shift. We begin to sense a shift in our practice when there's that disengagement. We get the feeling—there's a kind of insight shift, in a way—that when I'm paying attention in this way, it's not increasing the suffering. In fact, it is allowing that pattern to wind down. And we begin to appreciate that this is the kind of direction that leads us away from suffering, even though it's not immediate.

The third kind of right effort is the effort to arouse wholesome mind states that have not yet arisen. This is basically cultivating the wholesome, actively working at cultivating wholesome qualities. Now, a lot of our practice seems to be in this territory of letting go of difficulty. But as that's happening, as we're working to let go of difficulty, we are also cultivating a lot of beautiful qualities—mindfulness being one of them. One of my teachers, Sayadaw U Pandita, said mindfulness is the most wholesome mind state. So engaging with paying attention to anger or frustration or depression or loneliness or whatever your pattern is, with mindfulness, strengthens that capacity of mindfulness. It strengthens the capacity for interest and investigation. It strengthens the capacity for concentration. As we are engaging, we are arousing and

cultivating these wholesome states that have not yet arisen.

The other piece of cultivating wholesome states that have not yet arisen has to do with what we talked about on the first evening: working with the precepts. Essentially, we can cultivate, we help to cultivate wholesome states by avoiding unwholesome actions, situations that oppose those qualities of mind. Refraining from lying cultivates honesty and truthfulness. Refraining from stealing cultivates contentment. Refraining from killing cultivates compassion.

So these wholesome qualities go hand in hand—these two aspects come together. We can also cultivate these positive qualities through positive practices. The quality of metta, for instance: each evening at the nine o'clock sitting, we are practicing active cultivation of that quality of the open heart, the kind heart. We can also cultivate generosity through simple acts of kindness, simple acts of giving. So we can find our way to practice, find practices and ways to cultivate these wholesome qualities.

The fourth kind of right effort is the effort to sustain wholesome states that have arisen. This one was confusing to me at first. I thought, why would you need to try to do that? Wouldn't it just happen naturally? If there's something beautiful happening, wouldn't it be natural for it to sustain itself?

Well, when I started looking at my own mind, I found that actually, no. In my mind, at least, I would notice particular beautiful states of mind coming up—calm, for example. I was on a three-month course, and finally the mind really settled down. I'd been working with a lot of difficulty and pain in the body, and one sitting, the mind just calmed down. I noticed it: calm, it's calm. The very next thing the mind wanted to do was, "Oh, this is a really good time to pay attention to that pain in my back." I wanted to do something with the calm, not just notice it. And what did I choose to do? I chose to do something that would agitate the mind.

Another time I was really noticing a lot of joy come up, and the joy was very strong, almost overwhelming. There was a little bit of me that felt, "I can't handle this—it's way too much joy." There was a feeling of pushing it down or trying to suppress it. But some little wisdom thought went through and said, "It's okay, it will pass." With that, I kind of let go, and it got really intense—almost like a big geyser of joy. Then very quickly, it settled into a much more calm kind of happiness.

Just noticing these states, being willing to turn mindfulness to them—that has been my experience as one of the best ways to sustain these wholesome states that have come up. Turn to them with mindfulness.

So these four kinds of right effort may seem like four different things. But we can also look at them as four sides of a single process. Consider what happens, what's being cultivated, what's being let go of, as we turn with mindfulness to a difficult mind state like anger. As we turn with mindfulness to that anger, it supports the letting go of that anger. Turning to pay attention to that anger, we're letting go a little bit around that engagement I talked about. So it's releasing that unwholesome state that has already arisen.

Also, bringing mindfulness to that state avoids an escalation of that anger. I've seen this in my own mind:

if I don't bring mindfulness to anger, it quickly gets worse and worse. When I bring mindfulness to it, it keeps it at a certain level. Bringing that mindfulness to it avoids the arising of more intense forms of that anger—that first kind of wise effort.

So bringing our mindfulness to experience automatically brings along these first two kinds of wise effort. And then it's also bringing along the cultivation of wholesome states. We're cultivating concentration. We're cultivating mindfulness. We're cultivating interest in exploring what's happening. We're cultivating and maintaining those states.

Really, with mindfulness, when we're working with mindfulness, we can trust these processes of the right efforts to be unfolding. But it helps to recognize when these wholesome states are being cultivated and when these unwholesome states are being released. It's a simple thing to actually acknowledge that. And it's very powerful—particularly acknowledging the wholesome, acknowledging the beautiful states that are coming along as we practice.

Another aspect of this teaching on energy and effort that the Buddha offers is around balancing the energy, balancing the effort. There's a fine line in our meditation practice—energy that lands between being too relaxed and too tense.

We're navigating this very narrow place. Energy that's too relaxed can tend to land us into dullness, sleepiness. Energy that's too tight can land us into restlessness, agitation.

The Buddha offered an analogy for this. He said it's kind of like tuning a stringed instrument. When the string on the instrument is too loose, it's not going to make beautiful music—it's going to go kind of thud. When it's too tight, when you pluck the string, it may break. So the tension on that string needs to be just right.

He points to this tuning of energy as being akin to an art form, because he's comparing it to the art of playing a musical instrument. And so really, this tuning of our energy is the art of meditation. The level of our energy changes continually—how much energy we have, how much energy is available. There's this continual flow of changing situations, and so we need to keep track of it, tuning our effort to the level of energy. We can balance our energy by making effort in a wise way, because balanced effort results in balanced energy. The way that we engage makes a big difference.

So this really is the art of meditation. There's an exploration that we make around how much effort to put into being mindful. And actually, in a moment, in a split second, it's not very hard to be mindful. Will was saying this last night—pay attention to your sensation of your butt on the chair or cushion or bench. Notice the sensations of your hands. Notice the sensations of your lips touching. How hard is it? In a moment, usually it's not very hard. What is challenging for us is to sustain it over time.

This, I think, is where our energy often gets out of balance. When we think, "Oh, I need to be mindful for the entire sitting," it's kind of like in that moment when we sit down, we're picking up the whole forty-five

minutes in this first moment and thinking, "I need to bring in the energy, the effort to be mindful for this entire forty-five minutes right in this split second." And that is overwhelming. We can't do it that way.

But what we can do is be mindful just in this moment, and in this moment, and in this moment, over and over and over again. Just the light effort that it took for you to notice each of those areas I pointed out—that's the level of effort that needs to be made. It just needs to be made moment after moment after moment, without projecting into the future thinking, "Oh, it's so many moments, I'm never going to be able to do it." Just the next moment and the next moment.

There are a couple of tricks we can use to help us with this. Joseph Goldstein points to what he calls the secret teaching of breath meditation, which is that the only amount of effort you need to make to pay attention to your breath is just enough effort to pay attention to half a breath. Can you pay attention to the in-breath? It takes about a second, second and a half. Usually we can sustain the attention for that long. And then at the end of that in-breath, you do it again for the out-breath. Make the amount of effort you need to sustain the attention for the out-breath. It's kind of like pulling yourself along half breath at a time. And the mind will wander, and we recognize that, we relax, we come back, and we just do it again. Just this gentle reminding, over and over again.

We can do the same thing in walking meditation. I found at times when my mind is really scattered in walking, it's helpful to pick something on the path, like three feet out—that little change in the grain of wood, or that little spot on the carpet, or that leaf on the pavement. Pick that spot and then ask, "Can I be mindful until I get to that leaf?" Two steps. I made it. And then pick another spot, and another one. In this way, we can pull ourselves along and begin to sustain this quality of light touch to the effort.

Really, this art of effort has to do with learning how to make the appropriate amount of effort for the situation. And it's often much less than we think.

particularly when I feel like I'm struggling, trying so hard to be present, I ask myself, how little effort do I need to make right now in order to be mindful? It's actually quite a bit less than I've been making. Many times I find that I can let go of a lot of the effort, that just for this moment, it doesn't take that much.

When the mind is dull and sleepy and drifting a lot, it's not that we need to force ourselves to be more mindful in a moment. It's that we need to remind ourselves more frequently to have that light touch of mindfulness.

There's an analogy I'd like to offer. It's riding a scooter—you know, those scooters that kids have, those narrow ones with two wheels, a little flatbed. You put one foot on the flatbed and tap your other foot on the ground to get the momentum going. When you're at a standstill, you have to tap the ground pretty frequently to get going. But after a little while, the momentum builds and you don't have to tap so frequently anymore. You can ride for a while. And then you start to notice, you get familiar with what it feels like as the scooter starts to wobble, and you know you need to put your foot down and tap again.

This is kind of the way effort works in our practice. Initially, and at various times of the day when the energy is low, we need to remind ourselves frequently—just a gentle reminder more often, like that tapping to get us going. Then we begin to get a sense of what it feels like for the momentum of mindfulness to have some energy, some flow. When we sense that mindfulness has some momentum, we can back off the level of effort and just ride that wave of mindfulness until we start to get familiar with the wobbly feeling and recognize: okay, I need to remind myself again, just this moment, just this moment.

This is one way to tune the effort—looking at this frequency. It takes patience, a lot of patience. We need to learn to attune ourselves to the level of energy that's present, get familiar with what that feels like, and be patient with ourselves when the energy is low. Just making the best effort you can given the circumstances.

That was a relief for me at one point. I went into my teacher and said, "I'm so exhausted. How do I practice when I'm so exhausted like this?" And he said, "Just make the best effort that you can given the circumstances." Oh, okay. I can do that. Just try the best I can.

There are always going to be rhythms and change, cycles of our energy level. When our energy is strong, we don't have to work so hard—we can just notice what's going on. When the energy is low, we just make the best effort we can. It's not that forceful kind of effort. It's just: okay, mindful for this moment. Can I be mindful in this moment? And this moment? That really light touch, as much as you remember. And then you'll forget and you'll wake up again. Just making the effort moment to moment. Conditions will change, and if you're making this balanced kind of effort, then balanced energy will be the result.

One important piece I have to say here is that when we're making effort and directing our energy, we often have something in mind that we want to do with it. I want insight. I want freedom. I want to let go of this clinging. And the way it works in this practice is that we do need to head in a direction, but we can't demand particular results at particular times. That will just lead us into suffering—that expectation, that bargain we make with our practice: if I work this hard for this sitting, then I'll get this, and then I'll be satisfied. That's a recipe for suffering.

So we have to head ourselves in a direction without having an agenda about when or how the results come. This balanced effort creates a container, a skillful container from which insights can unfold. It's kind of like a fruit tree—we can't make the fruit ripen.

But we can support the conditions that will allow the tree's natural process to result in ripe fruit. We can support the conditions of the tree having water, having nourishment. We can take care of the weeds, making sure that there are good conditions for the tree to flourish in. And then we just have to settle back and allow the natural process of the tree to produce the ripe fruit. When the fruit is ripe, it will fall from the tree. We cannot make that happen, but we can create the conditions. And this balanced effort is a key part of the conditions—creating the ground out of which insight will come.

I'll close with a quote from a Sri Lankan monk who is both a scholar and a practitioner. His name is Piyadasi Thera. He wrote:

"We must, by our own resolute efforts, rise and make our way to the portals of liberty, and it is always in every moment in our power to do so. Neither are those portals locked and the key in the possession of someone else from whom it must be obtained by prayer or entreaty. That door is free of all bolts and bars, save those that we ourselves have made."

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