Wisdom and Effort

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 1:01:41

For those of you for whom this is the first retreat, I'd like to offer my joy with you that you have made it through a whole day of your first retreat. It's an accomplishment.

Tonight I'd like to talk about one of the things Pat talked about this morning—how our practice is kind of like an art. He talked about how we create our own canvas of our practice. All minds are different in so many ways, and certain practices work for some of us while other practices are more helpful for others.

In my own exploration of this art of meditation, there's one aspect of the practice that I feel is really helpful to highlight, and that is how we use our effort. So the exploration tonight will be about wisdom and effort.

The usual way that we approach making effort for whatever we want to do in our lives may not actually be the best approach for our meditation practice. We often have a kind of go-out-and-get-it attitude, bringing a lot of energy to what we're trying to accomplish, a lot of focus and drive to what we're doing. That approach may not actually be the best way to go about our exploration of our minds.

In a way, our minds are a delicate creature. It takes a very delicate kind of investigation to really begin to see into how our minds work. The sledgehammer approach doesn't get to the subtlety of what's going on.

So the Buddha encouraged us to apply ourselves with wisdom and with balance. I'd like to start by talking about the wisdom that he suggested we bring, because this wisdom frames the entire approach to our practice.

The Buddha offered a kind of worldview, a way of approaching our experience and our lives, that shifts our perspective and reorients us in terms of how we live in the world. Our usual worldview is given to us by our families, our parents, our culture, the television programs we watch, the radio we listen to. All of that influences how we see our world, and from that perspective we orient our activities in a certain way—in particular, around what we think it takes to be happy.

Our approach to being happy is basically one of acquiring material things or good opinions of people. We think that happiness will come from that acquisition. One of the teachings of the Buddha is that there are these eight worldly winds that blow through our lives: praise and blame, gain and loss, pleasure and pain, fame and disrepute. The Buddha's perspective is that these are just like winds blowing through the sky. There's going to be winds coming from the north or the south, some days from the east or the west, and that's just what's happening.

But the way we normally approach our lives and happiness is to believe that it's possible to only have pleasure, praise, gain, and fame—that this is what happiness would be, to have only that in our lives. We somehow get the idea that it's possible, and that if it's not happening for us, we're the problem. If we haven't managed to construct our lives to be nothing but pleasure, fame, praise, and gain, something is wrong with us.

The Buddha's approach is this: if that's where you're looking for happiness, you are destined to be unhappy, because it's not possible to control those worldly winds. We don't have that kind of control.

So the wisdom that the Buddha offered largely has to do with this topic or concept of dukkha, often translated as suffering. I like leaving it untranslated because the term dukkha itself is much broader. It means everything from really catastrophic suffering down to the subtlest unease that comes with just being alive.

The Buddha, in his own journey, went out in his own exploration to see what this dukkha is about and whether it's possible to be free of it. In his exploration of his own mind, what he discovered is essentially that our struggle with the world is not caused by those eight worldly winds but by our relationship to them. We struggle because we are pinning our happiness on things that are impermanent and unreliable. That's what we're doing. It's the poignancy of being human.

One of the stories told about the Buddha's awakening is that after he awakened, he looked around at how people were engaged in the world. He saw them trying to be happy, looking for ways to find happiness, doing the best they could—and doing exactly those things that would ultimately lead to their unhappiness. Trying to hold on to things that are impermanent and unreliable. Living in a delusion that it's possible to control these worldly winds. Feeling like it's a problem when we don't have that control.

This is one of the offerings of wisdom that the Buddha has for us: that it is this holding to impermanent, unreliable experience that is right at the core of our struggle. And in that, he also saw that there are some key things that happen in our minds that keep us tied up with this—we could call it a program.

We are born with this notion—it seems to be very deeply ingrained in us. It's not necessarily just given by culture. The Buddha described this program of how we try to find happiness by controlling the world, by holding on to things that are impermanent and unreliable. He described this 2600 years ago. This is not a new program running in our minds. It's a very deeply embedded program.

But fortunately, it's not hardwired. This is one of the things he discovered: it's possible actually to shift how our minds work. And one of the key things he suggested we do is to look at certain states of mind. He said that if we take actions out of certain states of mind, we will tend to wind ourselves into the patterns and habits of suffering over and over again. He identified those as states that were based or rooted in greed, aversion, and delusion. Greed—wanting to hold on to things. Aversion—wanting to get rid of things. And delusion—confusion and misperception around our experience.

So this is another key piece of wisdom that the Buddha offers us: if we act, if we take action out of states of mind based in greed, aversion, or delusion, we will tend to perpetuate our struggles.

These states based in greed, aversion, and delusion, the Buddha calls *akusala*—unskillful states, unwholesome states of mind. I like the word "unskillful" because it points to a more practical ethics in what the Buddha was talking about. He really wasn't that judgmental about these states of mind. He simply said: if you want to be happy, these states are not going to lead to your well-being and happiness. So it's helpful to find ways to let go of those states, to cultivate states that are based in non-greed, non-aversion, non-delusion.

These unskillful, unwholesome states encompass the whole host of afflictive emotions—and then some that we may not necessarily think of as afflictive, but when we actually begin to look at them, we see their agitating nature. States like anger, hatred, irritation, frustration, confusion, excitement, pride, lust—lust for power, lust for money, for fame—despair. All of these states are rooted in greed, aversion, and delusion.

Skillful states of mind, wholesome states of mind, are those that tend, when we act out of them, to lead us more towards happiness. These are states like joy, happiness, tranquility, peace, equanimity, mindfulness, generosity, love, compassion. When we act out of states like that, when those are in our hearts as we act, our actions tend to lead us more towards happiness.

So this is the wisdom that the Buddha offers us. If we want to free ourselves from the way we get caught, the way we struggle in our lives—and this is the full range of struggle, everything from the despair we feel when we lose a partner to the irritation we have at a co-worker who didn't finish their job.

I want to pause here, because sometimes saying something like that—saying that the despair we feel at the loss of a partner is *dukkha*—can feel challenging. And it is dukkha. It is. We feel it as dukkha, as suffering. And yet sometimes we feel, "Well, if I didn't feel that despair, I wouldn't be human." So we may resist looking at what we're holding on to there. We may resist seeing our participation in that despair.

But there's a way—and I think in my own experience and exploration of this—that loss, the experience of loss, will produce a form of sadness, a form of acknowledgment of that loss that is not flat. It's not like nothing. It's not like you're this robot, this automaton that just registers "oh, loss" with no reaction to it. There is a response in the heart and mind. But the heart doesn't contract around it. It's as if the heart is acknowledging that this is the way it is, without resistance. Feeling the loss fully, but without resistance, without clamping down around it, without getting stuck.

When I've experienced this kind of sadness, it feels very pure. It doesn't stick anywhere. It's like it's just washing through.

It doesn't have any kind of stickiness to it.

So this perspective of wisdom—that it's possible to begin looking into our minds and seeing how our mind is participating, whether these unwholesome states are acting in our minds—this is the way the Buddha suggests we apply our energy and make effort in our practice.

Energy itself is a kind of neutral quality of mind. The same energy could be connected with actions tied to hatred and despair. There's energy in the mind and body bound up with those kinds of states. And energy can also be directed towards freeing ourselves from the ways we get stuck. Energy itself is neutral, and the art and skill of our meditation practice is to orient that energy towards the wisdom the Buddha offers us—cultivating skillful qualities, letting go of unskillful qualities. This is essentially the Buddha's definition of what making skillful effort is.

I'm going to take a few minutes to talk about this teaching on wise effort. The Buddha said there are four ways of making skillful effort in this practice. And no big surprise, it's oriented around these qualities—whether we have skillful qualities or unskillful qualities in our mind. He said that we should work towards avoiding and letting go of unskillful states, and we should work towards cultivating and maintaining skillful states.

The first one, the actual wording of it as I'll read it to you, is: the effort towards the non-arising of unwholesome states that have not yet arisen. That's the way it's framed in the texts. The effort towards the non-arising of unwholesome states that have not yet arisen. Three negatives in that sentence. That one I had to think about when I first started reading this. Essentially, to change the wording a little bit, it's the effort to avoid those states that lead us to suffering.

Part of how this works is that we explore in our minds when we do find ourselves in states of suffering—what is it that's getting us there? We explore, we notice what goes on in our minds, and begin to recognize: these are the conditions that lead to this. The avoiding is to, in seeing those conditions, begin to not engage with them.

A simple example: you might think this teaching about avoiding unskillful states means something like noticing that every time you see a particular person, your mind gets really agitated. You begin to notice the connection—and this may be pretty obvious to you—between being in the same room as this person and the agitation. One way to explore this teaching would be to say, "Okay, that person is the cause of the agitation, so I should avoid being in their presence." And that would certainly help the situation.

Yet the avoidance the Buddha is suggesting we look at has a subtler exploration than that. A subtler way to explore it. Because again, remember that the Buddha said there's something in our own minds. Stuff is happening in the world—praise and blame, gain and loss, pleasure and pain, fame and disrepute. And it's not that stuff that's the problem. It's our relationship to it.

So in this situation of having agitation arise whenever this person is in the room with you, the encouragement might be to look more closely, because that person doesn't have the power to agitate your

mind. And that's actually really good news. That person does not have the power to agitate your mind. The worldly winds do not have the power to cause suffering. Your own mind is what has that power.

A deeper exploration might be to recognize that when that person is in the room with you, fear arises, or confusion arises. Maybe that fear or confusion is because the person has a body shape that looks like somebody who was very unkind to you when you were younger. You might begin to see those connections in the exploration of this. This deeper exploration of looking at the causes of agitation, the associations in the mind, how the actual agitation is constructed in that situation—as we meet those more direct internal causes, our mind begins, through wisdom, through seeing how that suffering is put together, to understand how to let go of it.

It's not necessarily something we can figure out how to do, how to let go of that suffering. But the mind, as it sees the workings of that suffering, begins to understand how to release and let it go. And so this would be a different way of avoiding that unwholesome state. We see into the deeper causes of that agitation.

This is more of what we explore in our meditation practice. As things arise, we turn towards them. And this is pointing to the second wise effort: the effort to let go of unwholesome states that have arisen. So we avoid unwholesome states, and we let go of unwholesome states.

Now, the letting go of unwholesome states that have arisen has some subtlety to it. We can at times, in seeing difficult states of mind—and actually Wes is going to talk quite a bit about working with challenging states of mind tomorrow, so this is just a preview—when we see that we're caught in some kind of unwholesome or difficult state of mind, such as anger, frustration, irritation, or wanting, when we see that we're caught by it, we may be able to actively let it go.

That's what it sounds like this exploration of wise effort is saying: we let go of unwholesome states that have arisen. So it sounds like I should be able to simply say, "Oh, there's anger. I'll let that go." How many of you have been able to do that? Our minds are just not that trainable immediately. Sometimes we can. Sometimes we can notice it, bring some reflection in, recognize that this isn't helping. We can see the drawbacks of the state, or we can actively bring in some reflections that help us to let it go. Or we may be able to actively redirect our attention.

There was one period of time in the first few years of my practice where anger was very strong—anger at a particular person. There was a very strong pattern. Whenever the thought of this person came up in my mind, anger would flare up. The causes and conditions there were pretty clear to see. But I also saw that as I tried to just allow the anger, be with the anger, trying to do that practice, the anger had way more momentum than the mindfulness did. I would just get sucked into the anger.

So I began doing a kind of setting aside. When the anger arose, I just bowed to it. I said, "I see you, but I can't be mindful of you right now. I'll be mindful of you when my mindfulness gets stronger. But right now, I'm going to pay attention to my feet." Just redirecting the attention—not with an aversive pushing

away, but simply saying, "Yep, I see you. I'm going to put my attention over here." This is one way of letting go of an unwholesome state. What I saw happen as I did that is that by turning my attention elsewhere, it was like taking the gears out of the anger. It wound its way down, and I went on with my day. This is another approach for that abandoning of unwholesome states.

I think one of the main ways we work with this abandoning of difficult states when they arise is simply the mindfulness of them. When we can be mindful of them, when our mindfulness has the ability to meet them without getting sucked in, we just turn towards them, allow them, open to them. And this too is like taking the gears out of the pattern.

If instead of being engaged in the pattern—in this case, anger—if instead of being engaged in that program, which when we are in that pattern without clear awareness and clear mindfulness, we tend to be thinking thoughts about it. We think, "Well, that person shouldn't have done that. I've got to figure this out. I'm going to make sure this happens and that happens so that they're just as miserable as I am right now." Our minds just spin, and it perpetuates the anger.

When we, instead of allowing that pattern to run, turn towards the anger and feel into being with it—or with any of these difficult states—just turning towards them, it's also like taking the gears out, putting the mind into neutral. If a car is going a hundred miles an hour down a road and you put the car into neutral, the car doesn't stop immediately, but it will stop because you're no longer giving it fuel.

Very similarly in the mind, when you allow and open to these states of mind without any longer feeding or fueling them, those patterns may continue for a while. You may have to hang out in the space of feeling what it's like to be a human being that feels that difficult emotion. This is what it's like to be a human being that's angry. You may have to hang out in that space for a while, but if you can allow it as opposed to engaging with it, it will wind out. This is a huge part of our practice. This is much of how this abandoning of unwholesome states works.

Wholesome states of mind that have not yet arisen.

There are two basic ways to do this, and Pat touched on at least one of them yesterday when he talked about the precepts. One of the ways to encourage wholesome states is essentially to refrain from acting unwholesomely. This is part of the benefit of our engagement with the precepts. As we engage in refraining from false speech, we are simultaneously—whether or not it's obvious—cultivating the wholesome quality of truthfulness. When we refrain from causing harm to living beings, whether or not we're consciously aware of it, we are cultivating compassion.

This is one way to work with the cultivation of wholesome states: to engage with the precepts, to engage with refraining from harming. And as Pat said last night, it has this beautiful side to it. It's not just about "thou shalt not." It's really about cultivating some of these beautiful states of mind. We cultivate compassion through refraining from harming. We cultivate contentment through refraining from

stealing. We cultivate truthfulness through refraining from lying.

We can also cultivate positive qualities through positive action. One of the practices we'll be exploring in this retreat is the practice of metta—actively cultivating the open heart, this feeling of a connected mind, a relational, non-sticky relationship, a kind of unconditional well-wishing. It's a very beautiful state of mind that we'll be actively cultivating by inclining our minds in that direction.

Another key way to work with this effort is to cultivate mindfulness—mindfulness with this perspective of wise effort. One of my teachers, Sayadaw U Pandita in Burma, said this kind of mindfulness is the most wholesome mind state. Actively cultivating mindfulness is cultivating a mind state that will serve you in your movement towards happiness.

Again, this is one of those things that's kind of hidden from us. We don't necessarily recognize or realize that as we're turning to pay attention to whatever difficulty we're paying attention to, we tend to be oriented toward the suffering. It's like, "Oh, there's depression happening. Okay, depression. This is what it feels like to be depressed. Unpleasant experience, heaviness, tightness." We're working with being with it. And yet we're not noticing that as this happens, we are cultivating wise mindfulness, wise effort, and wise concentration. They're kind of coming along for the ride, these beautiful states of mind, as we engage in our mindfulness practice, whatever we're looking at, whatever we are with.

So this is another major way we work with this aspect of wise effort—arousing wholesome mind states. The moment that mindfulness re-arises, that moment Pat was talking about this morning when mindfulness spontaneously re-arises, that's the opportunity to reconnect with that wholesome quality right there.

And then the fourth: the effort to sustain wholesome states that have arisen.

When I first heard this one, I thought, "Well, why would we have to make effort to sustain these beautiful states of mind?" Then I began looking at my own mind and saw a couple of things. I saw that my own mind actually felt really uncomfortable with joy and happiness. I was way more comfortable with aversion. So when joy arose, one of the patterns that happened is I kind of talked myself out of it by spinning myself into the future, thinking about how this was going to keep going, what I was going to do to make sure it continued, how this person has to know, what that person needs to understand.

There were times when I would wake up into a state of agitation. I remember one time in particular, I woke up into this state of agitation while I was driving my car. I thought, "Okay, come back. Steering wheel, hands on, be present, come back." Then the mind would spin right out again. It happened several times, and I'd just come back to my hands on the steering wheel. Eventually I wondered, "What else is going on here?"

When I opened up my attention to ask that question, what I discovered was that I was really happy. I had completely missed it because the mind had picked up on "How do I keep this going?"

So actually noticing, recognizing when happiness arises, when calm arises, when joy arises, when generosity arises—mindfulness of these states is really one of the biggest ways to sustain them.

In our practice, many beautiful qualities begin to come along. We cultivate attention to the breath and calm begins to settle.

Rather than having a sense of indulgence in that, clear knowing: yep, calm. There's calm and the breath. There's spaciousness and the breath. There's joy and the breath. Clearly recognizing these states rather than either missing them entirely, which was my pattern, or reveling in them.

Sometimes in exploring this teaching of right effort, people ask how it fits with being mindful, opening to what's happening, meeting our experience without trying to change it. They say, "Well, how does that fit with wise effort? In wise effort, we're trying to cultivate the wholesome. We're trying to let go of the unwholesome."

What I'd like to point out here is that when we practice mindfulness in this way of opening to and allowing experience, it already contains the four right efforts.

For example, if we are cultivating mindfulness of frustration—turning towards it, opening to it, allowing it—we are no longer feeding the anger or the frustration. We're no longer thinking it with our thoughts. We're no longer fueling that frustration with our thinking. And so we are essentially, in that activity of bringing mindfulness to our frustration, avoiding the arising of more frustration. There may be some frustration arising now, but it is not getting worse. It's not perpetuating. So we are avoiding the arising of future frustration, which is the first kind of wise effort.

We are working with the abandoning of the frustration that has arisen—the difficulty, the state that has arisen—by the very mindfulness of it, that disengagement of the gears that will eventually wind out, like the car coming to a stop as we put it into neutral. And we are simultaneously cultivating mindfulness, concentration, wisdom, and compassion.

One of the great things that develops as we watch our own minds is a kind of recognition: in seeing what our minds do, we clearly see that it's not just our own minds. This is the mind multiplied by—what is it now?—seven billion. Seven billion people in the world. It's just amazing. We see very clearly that it's not just our own mind. And with that, compassion is born. The poignancy of seven billion minds doing this same thing.

So right effort in our mindfulness practice is essentially four sides of a single process, four ways of being with experience.

The other aspect or avenue to reflect on regarding effort and energy is in how we bring our effort to our practice. I want to talk about one basic thing here. If we have a kind of curiosity or interest in our experience, if we bring to our experience an attitude of interest, of curiosity, of exploration—instead of,

"Oh, frustration's arising"—it's like, "Okay, frustration." It actually doesn't matter what's arising in our minds. It really doesn't matter. We can cultivate these qualities of mindfulness, of equanimity, of compassion, of mettā with whatever is happening. So it doesn't really matter what's happening. What matters is how we are with it. What's our relationship to that?

If we can have this relationship of curiosity—"Oh, frustration. What's it like to be a human being that's frustrated?"—if we can have that approach, a very natural kind of energy follows. It doesn't feel like we have to drag up the reserves of energy and go, "Okay, let's turn it up. Let's bring that mindfulness to that frustration." That interest, that curiosity, that investigation naturally brings a very skillful kind of effort and energy to our minds.

You may be able to reframe or just drop in the attitude of curiosity into your experiences. It's like you're all out there running your own science lab on your own minds. What does this experiment do? Here's the experiment of depression—let's see what that's producing. Here's the experiment of anger—let's see what that's producing. Not taking it personally.

Again, recognizing these patterns—they're human patterns. So curiosity, interest, investigation.

The other piece is that sometimes we do need to bring in that active approach. Yes, we need to actually direct the attention, make some effort to connect. This is really where the art of effort comes in.

The Buddha actually used an analogy of art, of music essentially, in exploring this tuning of our effort. He said to one person who had been—the story goes that this person had "enlightenment or bust" on his forehead. He was going for it. He was doing walking meditation all night long until his feet bled. And the Buddha said, "You know, when you were a lay person, did you play a musical instrument? Did you play the lute?" And he said, "Yes, I did." And the Buddha said, "Well, when the string was too tight, did the lute make beautiful music?" And he said, "No." "And when the string was too loose, did it make beautiful music?" And he said, "No." "Likewise, in our practice, the amount of effort has to be tuned like that—neither too tight nor too loose."

The implication here was that Sona, the name of this monk, had his string tuned so tight that it had completely snapped. He was way overdoing it.

So it's helpful to recognize essentially some of the symptoms of overdoing it or underdoing it. Overdoing it, too much effort, often will manifest as a restless energy in the mind. Underdoing it will often manifest as a kind of dullness or sleepiness in the mind. We can balance the energy—this tuning—by the way we make our effort.

Sometimes our effort is too intense. This is like when Sona was doing the walking meditation until his feet bled. When our effort is too intense, we get exhausted. We get burned out on the practice and it feels burdensome. So those are also some possible signs to notice. If it feels burdensome to be practicing, sometimes our inclination is to think, "Oh, the practice feels burdensome, but I need to practice," and we

double down. What actually may be called for there is to back off. If it feels burdensome, see what happens if you back off.

Sometimes what I explore when I'm feeling like there's that kind of charged energy—I ask myself, how little effort do I need to make to be mindful? Let me check out whether maybe I don't have to make this much effort. Let me just sit back and see. Oh, yeah, wow. No, don't have to make that much effort. Okay. And it's kind of like dialing back the level of effort. And at some point, it's a little too dialed back and the mind goes off. Okay, well, maybe that's too far. Let's add a little bit more intentionality.

When the effort is too lax, our mind won't stay present. The mind won't be connected to experience. There may be a sense of laziness or dullness in the mind. That may be when we need to add a little bit of connect, meet, sustain the attention on experience.

And yet, that way of connecting, sustaining, meeting experience—it's not like picking up something heavy. It's more like picking up something light and then doing it again and doing it again. In a moment, it actually doesn't take very much effort to be mindful. Right now, how much effort does it take to notice the sensations of your hands? How much effort does it take to notice the contact of your hips or buttocks on the chair or cushion or bench? How much effort does it take to notice the contact of your lips touching each other? It doesn't take much in a moment to be mindful.

What's hard for us is to sustain that. And typically what we think we need to do is to bear down and hold the attention there. It's like, "Okay, attention to breath. I'm going to bear down on it."

The approach that's more helpful to us is rather than bearing down in that way, trying to hold on, is to be with the breath for a second, for half a breath. Joseph Goldstein sometimes calls this the secret teaching of our breath practice. All the effort you need to make is to be present for half a breath. That's it. Half a breath. And then do it again. And then do it again. And then do it again. And again.

It doesn't take a lot of effort in a moment. It takes the light touch moment after moment after moment. And so exploring that light touch of effort and connecting moment after moment—effort in this practice is about the frequency of that connection. Every half breath, for example. Every one to two steps in the walking. Just reminding yourself.

I would do this in the walking. If I found my mind really wandering around, I would say, okay, I see a little spot on the carpet there. Let's see if I can make it to that. And it was like a step and a half. I could make it that far and be mindful. And then I'd pick another spot. Oh, I can make it that far. And in this way, just that light amount of effort, just like hand over hand, just a little bit of effort moment after moment.

So the effort that we make is a light touch many times. And then what begins to happen is that effort gains a momentum. It's like being on a scooter. Initially, if you're on a scooter, you have to tap the ground a lot to get it going. But once the momentum builds, you don't have to keep tapping it as much. You get familiar with the feeling of the momentum of that scooter going forward, and you learn when you need to put your

foot down again.

It's similar with our meditation. We have to start by making that light touch like every half breath, every half breath, every half breath. And then we begin to see that there's more of a momentum, and maybe we see, wow, we can hang out for three or four breaths and we don't actually have to do much. But if we don't make that connection, that conscious connection every three or four breaths, we may find our mind wandering off.

And so this is really the art of meditation—getting familiar with essentially our mindfulness and energy getting wobbly, like the scooter gets wobbly. Get familiar with that state of being present, and we begin to recognize how much do I actually need to make that light touch of effort? How much do I need to tap? How much do I need to connect? Connect and sustain, connect and sustain.

The sustaining is kind of like riding that scooter. We get familiar with how long can I ride this wave of awareness? We get familiar with that feeling of awareness and learn to tune our effort to how that awareness is. If that awareness is actually naturally sustained and we're every half breath noticing, every half breath, every half breath, we're actually getting in the way of our mind's ability to get into that subtlety that I was talking about. The less active effort we employ, the more fine our understanding of our minds can be.

And so this skillful effort produces a skillful energy, and it begins to feel effortless over time. You may run into this in little bits. And it's not like you hit the effortless part of the retreat and it's like that for the rest of the retreat. It doesn't work that way, unfortunately. You may find that during one sitting, you find, wow, I can be with fifteen breaths without hardly doing anything at all. And that's a taste of that less effortful practice. And then something will happen—a neighbor sneezes and the mind goes reactive over that.

And then, oh, okay, every half breath now. Let me notice the agitation of how I was with that sneeze. And okay, that agitation's unpacked. Half a breath, half a breath, half a breath. And then, oh, every three or four breaths is enough now. So it's really tuning our level of effort to how the mind is in this moment.

We make the effort, we turn our attention towards our experience, and then we let go. Our other habitual way of being in the world is to make effort to get something, to get a particular result. On our schedule, usually—we want a particular result. And in this practice, we really have to let go of that.

Our exploration is cultivating the mindfulness and the wise effort. We cultivate those turning towards our minds, our hearts, meeting whatever's arising there. The wisdom, the insight, the freedom, the release—that happens on its own time. We can't make it happen. And so we make the effort and then we let go. We're not in control of the time frame of our practice.

Kamala Masters, one of my colleagues—I was in a retreat that she taught, this was probably ten or fifteen years ago. And she told a story of a time in her practice when things were fine, things were kind of going

along. And yet there was an impatience. It just seemed like ordinary. Isn't something supposed to happen? And she went to her teacher and described what was going on and described all of the experiences that she was having. And his response was: "When the fruit is ripe, it will fall from the tree."

And that, to me, was such a helpful teaching. Over and over again, I found myself with that attitude of making the effort in order for a result, and then reminding myself: I can't create that result. When the fruit is ripe, it will fall from the tree.

Our effort in helping fruit ripen is to make sure that a tree has the nourishment it needs, to make sure that the tree has the water that it needs, the conditions that will allow it to have the fruit ripen. But we can't make that fruit ripen. And likewise in our practice, we create the conditions in which our minds can release. This wise effort and wise mindfulness are the conditions, the soil, the nourishment for the release. But that happens in its own time.

When the fruit is ripe, it will fall from the tree.

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