The Art of Wise Effort

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 53:48

The Buddha once said, "With wise effort and earnestness, make for yourself an island that no flood can overwhelm." And of course, what the Buddha meant by this is an inner island. I'm sure some of you at various points throughout the day today might feel that getting a little dirt together in the middle of the ocean and making an island that way would be a whole lot easier than what you've tried to do throughout this day.

What is being spoken about in terms of no flood being able to overwhelm is finding a place of refuge within. This island means refuge—finding a refuge within that is untouched, unaffected by conditions, by outer and inner conditions. Another way of saying this is that we are learning how to find ourselves at home with ourselves, wherever we are.

Some years ago, I went to a funeral of a friend's mother, and it was in a church that was evangelical Christian. What it was called—some of you may be familiar with this—was a "going home service" for this person. I thought that was great, just such a wonderful way of looking at death. And I also thought, can we go home now without having to die? Is it possible to find a way to go home right now? This is what is being spoken about. This is what is being encouraged by the Buddha: to find an inner home, to find an inner refuge that is stable and steady, that arena that is at ease.

How is this refuge or home realized? Through the awareness of our life, through bringing mindfulness to whatever it is that is occurring from moment to moment, seeing into conditions and seeing beyond conditions. What mindfulness means, by definition, is not clinging to whatever it is that's occurring—not grasping, not trying to hold on to, not trying to make last. It also means not trying to get rid of, push away, or react to with aversion. And mindfulness means not identifying with what is happening inwardly as being who we are. Sometimes we get more grandiose and think it's how the world is because of what we feel like inwardly. So mindfulness also means not identifying with what is occurring.

What happens when we're able to be mindful is that even though it doesn't always feel like it, it begins a process of dissolving the unconscious patterns within the mind, the unconscious ways that we suffer. So it's not a path of instant gratification—far from it. And at the same time, we can have the confidence that this is what is happening each time we're able to be aware and awake and mindful. Each time, we're chipping away at an unconscious habit or pattern within the mind that has kept us stuck for an awfully long time.

However, it takes effort to be mindful, usually quite a lot of effort to be mindful. I'll read you something that Milarepa, a great yogi from the past, wrote. This was after a very long retreat—not seven days, but

over eleven months: "Not stopping at mere intellectual knowledge of the gradual processes of profound path teachings, I practiced without regard for fatigue or strain until the signs and marks of progress appeared. In one place during a practice retreat, I meditated strenuously for eleven months, never allowing my cushion to lose its warmth." I would also comment by saying he was in a really cold area of the world. So here, it's not really such a big deal. Maybe we leave for forty-five minutes to walk and our cushion still holds some warmth. But in a cold place, the cushion would lose it immediately. So he would have had to be sitting quite a lot.

Obviously, effort is really an essential aspect of the path. We can't get around it. We can't pretend we don't need it. We can't dream about the practice and think anything's going to happen. We can fantasize, but nothing is going to happen if we do. Effort is really necessary. It is something that we have to work with, and it really is an art. It's not a science, it's not a formula—it really is an art. This is what I'd like to talk about tonight: the art of effort.

One of the questions is, what is wise effort? Notice that the Buddha didn't just say "with effort and earnestness," but "with wise effort and earnestness." So what is wise effort? In other words, what is effort in the context of meditation? The reason why this is important is because effort in the context of meditation is actually totally different than our usual definitions of effort. That's why it's so confusing. That's why we find ourselves sometimes struggling and not knowing what to do. We think, "Okay, I'll try as hard as I can," and we find ourselves completely coiled up and tense and caught and engaged in a struggle. A way to move out of this struggle is to understand more deeply what wise effort actually is in the context of what we're engaged in, which is the world of meditation.

Meditative effort is not the effort to attain or maintain a particular state of mind. Although we might like it to be—when once in a while a wonderful state of mind comes along, we might want to grasp onto it and try to make it last. We might want to think, perhaps because it makes us feel productive, that if we could only attain this particular state of mind or that particular state of mind, then everything will be over, everything will be easy.

But the problem is that when our effort is directed towards trying to attain anything in particular—a particular state of mind, a particular feeling, a particular emotion—it becomes problematic because it's our imagination, and it has everything to do with something happening in the future rather than what really works, which is mindfulness in the present moment. Being here, not in the future, not lost in our thoughts about what could happen, may happen, will happen, should happen at some future date. Every time we do that, we've lost our wise effort. So we must be aware of this tendency to aim towards a particular state of mind.

Meditative effort is also not the effort to change what is happening within, to change the contents of consciousness. The contents of consciousness do change, absolutely they change, but our efforts to change what is happening within involve non-acceptance. Instead of actually taking up what's happening, we're

resisting, we're trying to push away. And pushing away brings us into struggle once again, brings us into turmoil, brings us into tension.

In our efforts to change the contents of consciousness, we think we should be having different thoughts than we're having, different feelings than we're having. We think we should be having the thoughts that we know the person next to us is having—even if they're worse than ours, at least they're not ours. We think, "If this were gone, then I could really meditate. If only I had different thoughts happening right here, if only I felt a different way, if only this, if only that, if only the conditions were different, then I could really begin to meditate. If only my breath would cooperate, if only my mind would cooperate, then I could begin to meditate."

But meditation is being present. The effort is to be present with things as they are.

Meditative effort is also not the effort to try to fix or work on oneself. So often we treat ourselves as objects that need to be fixed. We relate to ourselves not as precious beings, not as radiant hearts, not as having inherent Buddha nature, but as these objects that absolutely need repair. We're here to do some manual labor on ourselves. Every time we do this, our effort again is unwise, coiled up. We're caught in struggle, caught in tension. Our efforts to try to become someone—even if that someone is a better meditator—this is really a problem.

Our efforts to try to become someone else, to imitate someone we've heard about or admire in some way, can also lead us astray. Of course, to learn from others is enormously wholesome. But when we think we can actually be in somebody else's body, this becomes problematic. When we're meditating in order to abandon ourselves and become someone else—in our imagination, I might add—we have left ourselves, and that is not meditation. That is once again unwise effort.

Effort that is not meditative effort is effort based on attachment, holding, grasping in some way. The attachment might be the effort to try to make pleasure last, or the effort to try to make that which is impermanent permanent. Both are absolutely impossible—despite how much we might try, it's not possible. We can make pleasure last for perhaps a few moments more, certainly, but eventually it will turn into pain. Pleasure in and of itself is wonderful; it's not a problem. But if we're trying to make it last, it involves tension, and once again, there is no relaxation or meditation occurring.

This non-meditative effort based on attachment is conditioned by the culture in which we live—understandably enough, the most human of things. Because practice values different things than the culture at large values. The culture at large values success above everything: fame, gain, appearance, accumulation. Meditation values freedom; it values understanding our inherent radiance of heart. This is the priority system in meditation.

The effort we're used to, this non-meditative effort, is based on what we know. Of course we bring the effort that we're familiar with—effort we've tried in our work life, our career path, our efforts even to

feed ourselves. But this is a very different effort than is required in meditation. We bring it into this environment because this is what we know, what we've been taught. The problem is that it really hasn't brought us much ease—or else why would we be here?

So there is a really big shift taking place in understanding what wise effort really is, effort that bears the fruit of freedom. We have to undergo quite a significant shift in our understanding. The first step is to notice when our efforts are misdirected and are bringing about tension and difficulty, and then try to aim in a different direction—towards meditative effort.

We must remember that some kind of effort is always happening in our life in one way or another: just to sustain ourselves, to take care of our bodies, to wash ourselves every day, to floss every day. All of these things require a huge degree of effort. The upkeep on a body, let alone a mind, requires tremendous effort. So effort is always happening—this is a fact in every moment of life. But the question is: what direction is it going in? Because this is what is important.

Are our efforts directed toward avoiding difficult feelings, difficult emotions? Because if this is the direction our effort is going, there will be huge parts of our life that are being left out. Perhaps on certain days ninety percent of our life, maybe seventy-five percent on other days, maybe ninety-nine percent on other days—left out through our habitual thinking that we can't stand certain feelings. The avoiding of difficult feelings. Is the direction of our efforts based on fear, being intimidated by the inner environment?

So one of our questions is: what is meditative effort? Meditative effort is effort that is informed by wisdom. It is actually really, really simple. And this might be the only important part of this talk. One line: it is the effort to be mindful. That is the effort we're interested in. It's the effort to be present. Over and over again, it's the effort to be aware. And that's it. No more than that. No less than that either, which is a big problem when we want to absorb into experiences. But no more than that.

Oftentimes we're overshooting the mark. We're striving. We're caught in pushing ourselves in the wrong direction. So remembering the relaxation of the effort being simply to be here, simply to be present. Not easy—I'm not saying easy—but simply to be present. That is the direction our effort needs to go in.

You could say that the untrained mind or the ordinary mind is a mind—and we might shift between the two, between ordinary mind and meditative mind, so not to label anyone as having an ordinary mind or a meditative mind—but an ordinary mind, or an untrained mind, is when we are lost in our experience, when we are caught in obeying every instinct that comes along, when we are absorbed into our experiences. Whereas a meditative mind is a mind that is aware of experiences, allowing ourselves to observe our reactions, to be aware of what is happening, enlarging our capacity to be aware. This is what meditative mind is, what meditative effort is—learning more and more how to relate skillfully.

A question we might ask ourselves is: how am I relating to this? Sometimes when we get caught in trying

to figure out what's happening, which is one of our fairly big habits, trying to fix what's happening, getting caught in the *what* of what's happening, getting caught in the contents of what is happening—the thoughts or the emotions that are occurring—or the *why* of what's happening, trying to find reasons from the past about why we're feeling what we're feeling in the present moment. When we get wrapped up and caught in this, we forget that the main question in terms of the growth of wisdom leading to freedom is: how am I relating to this?

This is a question we might remember to ask ourselves from time to time, especially when we're caught. How am I relating to this? Am I relating to it by trying to push it away, thinking that's going to work? It doesn't. It only strengthens it. Am I relating to it by trying to hang on to it, by grasping, by trying to make it last? It doesn't. It's going to go away anyway. Am I relating to it by identifying with it, thinking it's who I am, defining myself by what is occurring? And if we answer yes to any of those, then what we would want to do is simply see if we can know that it's happening. Remembering our capacity to be aware in that moment.

When we do remember—when we're caught in the *what* and the *why* and we remember the *how*, how am I relating to this—sometimes it's as if what opens up is just a little crack under the door. You know when a door is shut and completely sealed, you can't see under it at all. And then just a little crack under the door, light emerging. Sometimes it's like that when we remember to ask this question: how am I relating to it? Because it can sometimes make a great deal of difference. It's along the lines of wisdom. It's a question that actually goes somewhere, rather than being completely caught up in the usual habits of mind—the *wh at* and the *why*.

Not that these questions are unimportant. They certainly help with some level of understanding, of self-understanding, and so I'm not at all saying they're not important. But a real way out is this question of *how*. Is it possible to relate to this by simply being present with it, by relaxing into it instead of resisting it quite so much? Is it possible to relate to it by accepting it, by making more room for it? By even embracing it—embracing the difficult? Is it possible to relate to it differently than the ways we're used to?

Meditative effort, as I said, is the effort to be present. It's the effort to turn towards the present moment over and over again whenever we find ourselves elsewhere—not judging and not assessing, not measuring how well or how badly we're doing, but just over and over again the willingness to turn towards the present moment instead of diving back in. Whether it's wonderful thoughts or terrible thoughts, we tend to dive back in. Even if they're worry thoughts, we tend to dive back in at times. So refraining from diving back in and turning towards the present moment once again. Asking ourselves: do we have a clear intention to be aware right now?

Using our efforts—the efforts we so often use to judge ourselves and our experiences and others—using all of that energy for something different. You might have noticed this a lot throughout the day: judging one's situation, judging oneself, judging one's reactions, judging how other people are practicing or not

practicing, looking at me or not looking at me, whatever it might be. Judging, of course, runs rampant on retreats.

So all of that effort that we might use in that direction—can we use that very same effort for awareness instead? It's there. It's good. There's effort happening there. So it's a matter of taking that effort and transmuting it into something useful, instead of leading to greater contraction of heart. Using that very same effort to try to turn around and see if we can be aware.

Now, we can be aware of our judging. It's not as if it shouldn't be happening or it's a problem. But if we use it to be aware of our judging, it's quite different than believing and justifying and feeling terrible because judging is occurring. It's quite different.

Meditative effort is based on understanding—the understanding of knowing what we can do and what we can't do. In other words, understanding what our responsibility really is in practice and what our responsibility really is not, because we have no say about it whatsoever.

What arises is not our responsibility. In the moment of its arising, it's not our responsibility because it comes out of the past. It's out of our control, and we can't say, "Don't arise right now." We do say that a lot—"don't arise right now"—but nobody listens. There's no wonderful response of it going away or changing. It just simply gets stronger, as you might have noticed, when we say, "Don't arise like this right now."

So the arising itself is something we have to learn how to surrender to because, again, in that moment of arising, it's a past accumulation. It's the past arising in the present. And then, if we can be aware, we can allow the dissolving to take place in the only moment it can happen, which is in the here and now.

Our responsibility, though, is to meet the arisings with awareness. Now, that is where wise effort comes in. Nothing happens magically. This is all very lawful. So if we can meet the arisings with awareness, then we're doing the best we can. We're doing the best we can. And then the results are truly out of our control.

We can't do anything about how the practice evolves or how it moves for us. This is something that you could say is karma, is grace. It's not like we can say, "I want an insight right now," or, "I'd like to have twenty insights right now, actually, not just one." We can't demand anything of the world or of ourselves or of this path or of the teachings or of the Buddha. None of this makes any sense at all. It really is out of our control. The results of practice are out of our control.

And so what we need to do is break the connection that can be so tightly bound between the efforts we put out and the results of those efforts. Because if we do, our practice can be easier and without as much struggle. It will be whatever way it is anyway, but it can be a really hard path, or it can have a little less struggle to it. So seeing if we can be mindful of the ways that we connect effort and results.

And I would say practicing with as much humility and humbleness as we can possibly summon up.

Because when there is this bonding between the efforts we're putting out and expecting particular results, there's a tendency to feel a little bit entitled. "Because I'm trying so hard, I should get." Well, one will, but who knows how long? No one can predict that. No one can predict anything in terms of time.

It's really the earnestness to go in a direction that makes sense to you—to go in the direction of freedom rather than the direction of contraction and misery and more suffering. It's really the direction that matters more than the expectation of results, because we can really torment ourselves a lot with the expectation of results. And every time we're expecting a particular result, we aren't practicing. So it actually slows things down quite a lot.

It slows the practice, the movement, the development of practice down quite a lot.

Michael was talking earlier about continuity of mindfulness. When we're caught up in expectations and plans about how our practice should go and what we should be receiving or getting, we've lost our continuity of mindfulness. And so we're slowing things down.

It's really important to break this connection, to see if we can put out our best, really meeting our life with awareness, being as present as we possibly can be, and at the same time letting go, not being caught in the expectation of results.

Meditative effort is actually the effort to connect. It's bringing a newness, a freshness into each moment. Someone called the bamboo forest master once said, "Everything I touch becomes new." When there is this sense of freshness, everything becomes new. Instead of everything seeming like repetition, which is sometimes the way it is on a retreat, where we think, "Oh my goodness, one more sitting, one more walking, another sitting, another walking, another emotion, another same emotion"—it just seems so incredibly repetitive.

If we are mindful, nothing is repeated, and we see that it isn't repeated. It's not something just to make us feel good. Actually, nothing is repeated because we are fresh in the here and now. We are really actually here, not lost in any belief that we can repeat anything from the past. Everything I touch becomes new when we have this kind of beginner's mind.

And as well, each moment is seen as important. Sometimes we can think, "Ah, I haven't been mindful for the last five minutes, the last hour, the last eight hours. It's not worth it to be mindful right now. I might as well not be because I've already kind of blown it."

Actually, life is only made up of moments. We always get a fresh chance in practice. You can't blow it. It's not possible. Things can take longer or shorter, certainly, but you can't blow it. So every moment holds this possibility of being awake, of being mindful.

As Saint Francis said in our practice, if the heart wanders or is distracted, bring it back to the point quite gently. If you did nothing during the whole of your hour but bring the heart back, though it went away

every time you brought it back, your hour would be very well employed.

And if we don't do this, we might be caught in the position of this poor fellow who wrote to Tofu Roshi, who was channeled by a woman named Susan Moon:

"When I meditate, I am very distracted by uncomfortable physical sensations. I seem to spend the whole time fighting off feelings of hunger, sleepiness, or pain. Please help me to regain true focus, Tofu Roshi. Signed, Bill."

"Dear Bill, Let yourself be one with whatever happens in your body. Learn to notice the precise details of your sensations. A good time to practice this is when you eat. How does the feel of the broccoli in your mouth change as you chew? Become the warm green softness as it oozes around your gums and tongue. Do not make assumptions about how you feel. Do not jump to conclusions. Do not name your sensations good or bad. Wait and observe. Do not say to yourself, 'I'm hungry, I'm in pain, a scorpion is stinging my left foot.' Just be one with the sensations—heat, tingling, piercing, burning, swelling of the toes—without changing them into ideas."

So, don't be like this guy.

Working with resistance is part of the practice. It's not other than meditation. It actually has to be taken in as a huge part of our practice. You could say, one could say, that retreats are controlled containers of suffering. I don't know if that resonates with you, but probably so. We also say that about our life.

Retreats are simply unadorned. There's no fanciness. There's no extraness. There's not anything happening other than life, other than we with ourselves being able to see what is happening a little bit more clearly because of the lack of the usual responsibilities and distractions in our life. So it's unadorned. We get to see our predicament more clearly, and the good news is—because if it were just that, this would not be a very good place to be—we get to see our predicament more clearly, and as well, we get to see our way out a little bit more clearly.

Now, to see one's predicament is the very first step in any path of freedom, because if we don't see, we won't want to change anything. We won't even know there is anything to do. We won't even know that there is any such thing as meditation or wise effort or freedom being possible.

So to see our predicament, to see the human dilemma, is of absolute essence. And then we can begin to see, and we can begin to apply mindfulness.

We notice that our resistance comes in different forms. Sometimes we notice that our resistance is happening because we find ourselves irritated. Nothing really is happening. We're just sitting there. Nobody is actually torturing us. But we find ourselves really irritated or cranky. We want to take a nap. We're sitting up straight and we want to take a nap. And we find ourselves a little bit, or a lot, irritated or angry. This is a sign of resistance.

We can find ourselves passive. We can find ourselves resigned or giving up. This too is a sign of resistance.

What is so important is to acknowledge our resistance and as well to be aware of our reactions to being resistant. Sometimes our reactions to resistance take the form of shame. We're not supposed to be feeling the resistance that we are. We're supposed to be practicing in a different way or having a different experience. And so shame arises. This is a reaction to resistance. Can we simply know that shame is occurring and not get into it, not dwell on it, not embellish it, not believe it?

The other reaction that we can commonly have is that of rebelliousness. "Okay, I'm out of here. Maybe I'll make it for the next few days, but then I'm absolutely never going to practice again. I'm just telling you right now, this is it." Or we sit while everybody else is walking, we walk while everyone else is sitting, we eat when everybody else is not. Whatever it might be, this kind of sense of rebellion that we have to do everything differently. Maybe by the sixth day we attain the schedule, but it's a slow road up till then.

Obviously there are reasons for some people not to follow the schedule because of health or other circumstances. But one knows when it's because of health and really good reasons and when it's this kind of rebelliousness that is really only affecting oneself.

What is important is not to follow these reactions because they are strengthened whenever we follow them, but simply to form a new relationship to the resistance that we experience—when it's in the form of irritation or of anger or of resignation or passivity. All of us have different forms of resistance, so you can fill in the blank there. Probably a lot of what you felt today was simply resistance.

Every time we don't want to be present, every time we just don't want to be with things as they are, there is resistance occurring. If we can acknowledge this and be aware of it, this begins to allow us to form a very different relationship to it. We can see the resistance as more natural. We can take it less personally, rather than seeing it as absolutely part of our character to resist everything. It really is part of things because it's part of the path. And it will gradually change if we're willing to be mindful of it in its various forms.

There are ways to engage resistance more creatively than sometimes we have found up till now. I want to mention a few ways to creatively engage resistance.

One of these ways is to remember that we don't have to feel like practicing in order to practice. This is really such a big one, and I'm passing this on because it was a hard-earned lesson for me. I remember on a retreat many years ago, I was setting myself to get up very early in the morning and to go to sleep late at night, because sometimes this can help with focusing of attention, with concentration, with samadhi, with strength of mind and heart. So I was setting myself to do that. But every time I woke up, of course, I was really tired. Why wouldn't I be? Because I had gotten very little sleep. So I would wake up, and the first thought I would have was, "I don't feel like getting up."

It was so liberating to realize that I could just get up. I could not feel like it, and I could get up anyway.

Maybe not enthusiastically, not bouncing out of bed, not with enormous cheerfulness—probably good nobody saw me and it was a silent retreat—but I didn't have to follow the bidding of my feelings.

It's really profoundly liberating to not have to follow every feeling that arises, to not be so identified with our feelings, to think that we can't practice just because we don't feel like practicing. We can move into something so rich and so deep by knowing that we can practice even though we don't feel like it. And we can use the forms of sitting and walking through the different ebbs and flows of energy. In any day in our life, energy will come and it will go according to conditions, according to our health, according to our health situation overall.

You know, if we're dealing with something really difficult in terms of our health, of course we're not going to have as much energy. If the day happens to be one in which we're just not all that healthy, we won't have a whole lot of energy. The time of day matters too—some of us are very perky early in the morning, and some of us are enormously irritated early in the morning. Some of us are really wide awake at night, while others of us can't wait to crawl into bed. I used to live with somebody who was unbelievably cheerful in the morning. It was so hard for me, I can't tell you. But we won't get into that.

The real realization here is that effort can be applied whether there is energy or not, because it's the effort to be present. We can apply the effort to be aware that there is no energy. You will find that there's never a way out. There are no excuses on this path, because one can always be aware. Even if you don't want to be aware, you can be aware of not wanting to be aware. There's always a way to practice. There's always a creative way to practice. When we get caught and stuck, when we're engaged in unwise effort and in resistance, we forget our options. We forget the enormous creativity that is available to us.

Another way to engage resistance is to take each sit and each walk on as an experiment. Sometimes we have this idea that we have to already have a great deal of faith in order to practice. And sometimes we do and sometimes we don't. Everyone here has some, just because here we are and we're not at the movies right now. All of us have some degree of faith operating. And it is really easy for it to completely disappear at times. You can have a huge amount of faith in your daily sittings and feel quite good and serene about them, and then come on a retreat and on the first day the faith just flies out the window. You think that you never had it at all. But it's just the nature of doing this over and over again—sitting and walking and being in this environment. Doubt very often opens, enters in.

So to take each sitting on with a beginner's mind, as an experiment—not planning, not expecting how things will be—saying, "I'm going to just try to be mindful for this sitting, period." Forget about past sittings, forget about the next sitting, forget about sittings to come, and certainly forget about seven days from now. Just this sitting. Is it possible for me to apply wise effort just in this sitting? And then be open to whatever the results may be. The same way with the walking—take them on as discrete entities. Just this sitting, enough. My whole entire life in this sitting. My whole entire life in this walking. And then reassess. I would prefer that you reassessed in seven days and not after each sitting or each walking.

This brings me to another way to engage resistance, which is the encouragement to be like a tea kettle. What I mean by this is to practice leaving the kettle on the stove. Suzuki Roshi talks about putting yourself in the oven until you're done, until the bread is baked. Another way is to just leave the kettle on the stove—not to keep picking it up, not to keep checking, "Is it boiling yet? Am I a Buddha yet?" Just leave the kettle on the stove and see what happens. This allows for a continuity of mindfulness as well.

What we are very interested in, in terms of this art of wise effort, is learning about balanced effort—learning what balanced effort actually is. Oftentimes we swing to either side, just because it's inevitable. This is how we learn in practice, by swinging to either side at times. I had a teacher once whose approach to wise effort was basically, "Sit until you die." That was it. I mean, he said a lot of other things, but you could really sum it up in that one phrase—or that's what I understood him to say. Sit until you die. And then another teacher's approach was, if you have any little slight discomfort or itch or difficulty or whatever, move right away.

Personally, I feel that balanced effort is what is necessary—finding a middle path for ourselves. "Sit until we die"—well, we may never want to practice again if we do that, if we really practice with that approach. And the approach of moving every time there's a little bit of discomfort means we will always be intimidated by discomfort. We will never find our inner strength and inner capacity to be with the pleasurable as well as the difficult if we move every single time. So we see if we can find the middle path, really work with the art of effort.

I had a teacher many years ago, a Tibetan teacher named Tara Tulku. I was going through some kind of difficulty at the time when I was practicing with him, a rather dramatic difficulty, and I couldn't meditate at all. I didn't know what to do. Of course, because of this "sit till you die" approach—I was really in that lineage at the time—I was trying to sit my way through it, continuing with this very striving approach and hoping that it would work. So I went to Tara Tulku and said, "Well, what do you suggest?"

I am trying my best, and yet I'm having a great deal of difficulty with this particular phenomenon.

And what he said to me was, "Go and have some cookies." Go and have some cookies. That was his teaching. That was his advice. Of course I loved it. I had no problem, no resistance at all to the cookie teaching.

But this sense of creativity, of finding the balance within ourselves rather than taking either a striving approach or a lax approach, a lazy approach—seeing if we can simply, from moment to moment, find the middle way. In a way, what we're aiming for is not being lax and not striving. Another way of putting this is the paradox of "be impeccable and take it easy." And you have to say that in the same moment, in the same breath. Be impeccable *and* take it easy. Not just be impeccable. Not just take it easy. But be impeccable and take it easy. This will serve us well.

What we are practicing is not feeding the fire within—not feeding the difficulties that arise, not feeding

the resistance that occurs, not feeding the irritation and the angst and the doubt and the uncertainty and the confusion and the longing, the aversion and the hatred and the anger and the jealousy and the envy and the pain. What we are learning to do is to not feed the fire and to let it burn out on its own. This is the way of practice: to let the inner fires of torment burn out on their own.

We feed the fire by dwelling in the angst, by pushing away and thinking that's going to work when it doesn't, and by being identified with what's happening as who we are. In these moments, we have forgotten to be present. We have forgotten to be mindful. And so inevitably, we are feeding the fire of inner torment.

To stop feeding the fire—Ajahn Chah spoke about it as simply not feeding a cat that comes by. If you don't, then that cat will probably not come to your house any longer. Eventually, the cat will stop coming. It's the same idea: not feeding the fire.

And also, to offer a New England proverb: you can't help trouble from coming, but you don't have to give it a chair to sit down on. Not giving it a chair to sit down on is every single time we remember to be mindful—our efforts going in the direction of mindfulness, of knowing, of awareness, rather than in the direction of our habit of trying to hold on, push away, or identify.

As we all know, or know at least at this point, retreats really are full of a lot of ups and a lot of downs—maybe in the first few days more downs than ups. But life is as well. It's really not any different from being on retreat, other than the conditions. To understand our life, to be free, to find our home in the midst of our life, we have to be in contact. We have to be intimate with what is occurring.

Being with the breath in the way that we are right now, learning how to simply let go and to be with the breath over and over again—over and over again and over and over again—is a training that helps us to be able to sustain our contact with whatever is arising. This is the direction of the practice. We're basically just with the breath right now, and we will be with the breath over the next couple of days.

But eventually the practice opens up so that we are with whatever it is that arises—without being intimidated or crushed by or overwhelmed by or sucked into, seduced by. But we don't have a chance of doing this if we haven't trained our minds to some degree. And we train our minds, we are engaged in training our minds, by being with the breath.

Meditative effort is this effort to connect. It is allowing experiences to come and to go, remembering that happiness does not lie in experiences. It lies in awareness. By enlarging our capacity to be aware, by remembering to be aware—this is how we find a true refuge within. It is how we find this island that can't be overwhelmed by conditions, by floods. It is really how we find our real home.

Our essential work in practice is actually not to try to achieve anything whatsoever. It's actually not to try to get anywhere or achieve anything. Instead, it is to rest within who we already are—that which is always and already free.

Just to end with something by Suzuki Roshi:

"Even though the waves arise, the essence of your mind is pure. It is just like clear water with a few waves. Actually, water always has waves. Waves are the practice of the water."

May all beings have ease of mind. May all beings have steadiness of heart. May all beings live in love and in compassion.

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