Five Spiritual Faculties: Effort

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:01:00

It's been said that more than any other topic in all of the Buddha's teachings, the Buddha spoke on the topic of right effort or balanced effort. More than nibbana, more than jhana, more than vipassana, he talked about right effort. And that points, to me, to the difficulty of establishing a right relationship to effort or energy in our practice.

In all my years of hearing the teachings, practicing myself, and the readings that I have done, there seem to be some conclusions that I and others are able to draw from all of this talk about right effort.

The first is that most everyone struggles to find a place of balance in right effort. However, secondly, the imbalances create the most colorful stories. And the third conclusion is that there's no consensus on what right effort is.

So we are left with having to find our own way. Having to find really what is balanced effort—what is the balance for us given our conditions right now. We can hear stories of famous Zen monks and monks or nuns at the time of the Buddha or even our own teachers, and we think, "My God, I can't do that." And sure enough, you can't. That was theirs. That was their experience of wrong effort or balanced effort. And you'll find your own. In time, I'm sure you'll be able to tell the horror stories of your wrong effort and entertain people.

I got a good lesson in right effort when I first met Kamala and came to Maui to take up residence together. Kamala's daughter was then thirteen, Therese, and she was just going into high school. She went out for the track team, and wanting to be a good parent, I said, "Well, let us know when your first track meet is, and we'll come." So she told us when the first track meet was—it started at four o'clock in the afternoon.

We went, got there early, and walked up into the cement bleachers to sit down. You know how the first meet of the season goes: it's very unorganized, pretty chaotic, and you have a hard time following just exactly what's happening. We sat there and finally located Therese on the field doing her warm-ups—running and jumping and doing things like that. We saw a few people that we knew and talked to them a little bit, and started shifting around in our seats because the cement bleachers were so hard.

An hour went by. They'd gotten started on some of the events, but nothing that Therese was in yet. So we called her over to the fence. "Hey, how's it going?" "Oh, okay." We noticed that even though she wasn't competing at the time, she would always look to us every five minutes or so to see if we were paying attention. So we had to pay attention. We were interested—we wanted to be interested—but cement

bleachers are hard.

Five o'clock came and went, and five-thirty came and went, and six o'clock came. We'd been there for two hours, and Therese was still doing her warm-ups and prancing around on the field and looking at us every five minutes. And we're paying attention, being very patient and persevering.

Six-thirty came and went, and seven o'clock came and went. Now it had been three hours past our dinner time, and we had canceled everything else we thought we were going to do that evening, and we were still waiting. Seven-thirty came and went. They said, "Oh, that's the end of the meet."

We said, "Well, Therese, what's happening? When are you going to do your thing?"

She said, "Gee, I don't know." So she went and asked the coach. They had forgotten to call her event.

They said, "Oh, wait, wait, we've got to do the last event. It's the triple jump for the girls." So they got the six or eight girls that were going to do this triple jump—you get three tries. They're all warming up and doing their thing, and then it's Therese's turn. She gets ready, she lines up, and then she runs. She runs, and she does her hop, skip, and jump.

It takes about three seconds. Got that done. And then they run through the second trial, and that takes about four seconds. And then she does the third trial, and that takes another four seconds. So the grand total time of her participation or competition was a little less than a minute, and we sat on those bleachers for about three and a half hours.

It was a lesson in how to pay attention, how to be present, how to really sustain your interest, how to manifest your thought. You think you're interested, and then you meet conditions. Hello. Welcome to the real world.

Well, I learned the value of persevering, of course, because Therese was keeping a close eye on us, making sure we were paying attention. I certainly had to let go of my expectations, because I didn't expect that at all. I finally had to give up my judgment of the officials and my blaming of them. And what I found after a couple of hours was that there's actually quite a lot going on that you can enjoy. There are all kinds of other events and sideshows and people doing all sorts of things, even if what you came for isn't happening.

Practice is a lot like that. You've got to show up, you've got to be interested, you've got to pay attention, even if nothing's happening. And it's helpful to let go of your expectations. And it's really instructive to pay attention to the sideshow, because that's where everything's happening.

So tonight I want to talk about how we can try to find this place of right effort, right energy, right attitude, really, to our practice. And I want to put it in the context of the five spiritual or controlling faculties that I spoke about last week.

The five controlling faculties, as you remember, are confidence, energy, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom. When we have some degree of confidence, when we feel some degree of assurance, trust, devotion, confidence—we are willing to make the effort. As we make the effort, we become more mindful. As we undertake dharma practices or mindfulness practices of any sort, we become more mindful. The continuity of that mindful awareness deepens concentration. It collects the mind. It calms the mind. It focuses the mind on the present moment. As the mind gets concentrated, collected, calmed, focused, we see more of what's happening. We see more details in this moment. We have an expansive vision. We have more understanding, really, of what's going on. This understanding is the development of wisdom.

The more we know about practice, the more we know about ourselves in practice, the more we know about our strengths and limitations in practice, the more confidence we can have. Understanding is the support for increased confidence, trust, faith, devotion to practice. And this development of these five qualities of mind, or these five factors of mind, gradually and incrementally supports each other and increases throughout our days and years of practice.

So I spoke about confidence, trust, faith earlier, and tonight I want to speak about energy or effort. There are five elements to right effort. Confidence is one, of course. Without it, we don't begin. But confidence alone is not enough. We also must be reasonably healthy in order to undertake practice. Health is the second factor. The sincerity of our practice is a third. Confidence, health, sincerity, energy, and understanding or wisdom. These are the five elements of right effort, and I want to speak about each of them a little bit.

The interesting thing about confidence, the first element, is that confidence is not based on, is not dependent on, what you actually know from the books. It's not based on intellectual knowledge. You can know everything in the books and have no confidence or faith to practice. Or, on the other hand, you can have no understanding of the books and have a lot of confidence, a lot of trust in yourself or the path of practice. And that was my experience.

I mentioned that after one retreat, I went to the Meditation Center of Massachusetts and joined the staff. I'd only done one two-week retreat, and one of the first days of my tenure there, I was up in the attic insulating the ceilings of the dormitory rooms with another person on staff, Rodney Smith, who is now also teaching in Seattle. We were having a discussion about the Dharma and our practice and Nibbana, of all topics, and I said to him, out of my enthusiasm and naivety, "I have absolutely no doubt that in this lifetime I will realize profoundly the Dharma." I also had no idea what I was saying. But I had that level of confidence. I had that level of enthusiasm and trust and just self-assurance—which was not yet confronted by reality.

And so when I suggested to Kamala that I give this talk tonight on right effort, she said, "Be sure to mention where you're coming from." Because sometimes it would be easy for me to give a talk on right effort wrongly—to really emphasize the striving, the playing the edge, pushing the edge, going over the

edge. That kind of effort. And that's only part of the story. There are times we'll all do that. The hard part for me is talking about the soft edge, the edge of balance, the edge of recognizing when you're pushing too hard and backing up, softening, letting the wisdom unfold that tells you it's time to back up. I have had a very hard time learning that lesson.

True confidence comes, though, with self-knowledge. When we truly know for ourselves, from our own experience, the nature of pain and how to deal with it, the nature of any of the hindrances—sleepiness, restlessness—and how to deal with them, this gives us a lot of confidence. When you can be with discomfort, when you can be with your hindrances for a period of time, it gives you a lot of self-confidence. It gives you a lot of self-knowledge that you can do it, you can be with this. And that kind of knowledge you don't get in a book. No teacher can tell you that. We can inspire you, inform you, entertain you, and try to get you to see that for yourself, but only by living through that experience will you know. Once you have lived through that experience, nobody can take that knowledge away. Nobody can tell you otherwise what you already know.

Doubts about ourselves, about practice, are not resolved by thinking or speculating, but only by practice. My teacher Sayadaw U Pandita used to say, at the end of my report when I would ask if I could ask a question, "If I let you ask this question and I answer it, you will have two questions for every answer I give you." But he said, "If you continue to practice, your practice will answer all your questions—if you can just be patient with the question." A lot of our doubt or lack of confidence is manifested as questions, when if we just practice, just extended our practice a little more, the answer would come.

Confidence is the foundation, the support, the cause for the willingness to make the effort. What effort is required? Some of you have just come to the retreat at its midpoint, and the first flavor of effort is really just getting here. Getting your whole body, your whole mind here. And kind of recovering from the deficiency of sleep, of energy, of interest. It's just getting ourselves back to a reasonable normal. Many of you come from traveling, from work, from stressful lives, and it takes quite a lot of rest, actually, for the first few days to be ready to practice.

But then there is a necessary adjustment once you've recovered some rest. There's an adjustment when you actually begin practice—I was going to say seriously, I mean continuously—when you arouse the intention to move towards fulfilling your aspiration by sustaining your energy, sustaining your attention. And that's really the effort of continuity, of just being there, just following the schedule, getting up with the bells, following the schedule, going through the motions, being willing to do that, fit the schedule.

Most of you who have been interviewing with me have noticed that I ask you: How's your sleeping situation? Are you sleeping okay? And your yogi job, is that okay? Not too stressful? Is the food okay for you? And the weather? Why do I ask that? It's not just to make conversation. It's because those are the conditions that will allow you to have good health—if you can sleep well, if you can get something to eat, and if the weather's suitable. And if you're healthy, if you come with reasonably good health or whatever

level of health you have, these conditions support it.

Because if we're not healthy, if we're not well physically, if we're really sick, we don't have any energy for practice, or very little.

A woman who used to practice with us several years ago wrote me a letter telling me about what happened to her one day at work. She felt like she had a touch of cold coming on, maybe the flu, and she got in her car to drive home. She got home and became violently sick. Then she related this harrowing account of what happened over the next two or three weeks—a terrific fever, the most painful body nausea, aches and pains throughout her body, swelling. It was just unbelievable. Things in all her limbs were plugged in, taking things out and putting things in. As she called them, "the blood-take people" came and jabbed her every so often. It hurt like the devil. She was in such misery that all she wanted to do was die. She was hoping she would die because it was so painful, so miserable. And her mind was really driving her crazy too.

After a couple of weeks, the fever came down and she got stabilized to some degree. Then she had her first coherent thought. And what did she think of? She thought of yogis practicing on retreat. She said that's what inspired her to really come out of it, and she realized then how valuable her practice had been up to that point. She ended her letter by saying, "Whenever you're on retreat, tell those yogis: just practice, practice, practice. That's the most important thing, because you never know when your health is going to go."

What most surprised her was that when she was sick, when she was really not well, she didn't think about practice. She didn't care about practice. She didn't know anything about practice. All she wanted to do was die. But as soon as she got a little bit well, that was the first thing she thought of—doing her practice, doing more practice, encouraging others.

I've spoken about urgency in our practice. What moves us to be here at this retreat now? What moves us to make the efforts that we do? Why is it so important that now we're here practicing? What makes it urgent in your life?

Sometimes we have lofty urges—we want to get enlightened. Maybe we have a life-threatening disease. Maybe there's been a death in our family that's really shaken us up. Maybe we've been tremendously inspired by a Dharma teacher. We just have a lot of urgency. But sometimes that which brings urgency is really quite mundane, ordinary.

Once I was practicing in Thailand in the forest, in the jungle, and at this particular monastery we went for alms round at 6:30 in the morning. We got food from one village that raised tapioca, and mostly what we got in our alms bowl was tapioca and sticky rice—that was about it. Sometimes there was ground-up meat with herbs, but that was it, every day. It wasn't really very nourishing, but it was heavy. When you would eat at eight o'clock, you'd eat quite a lot, because by 8:30, that was it until eight o'clock the next day. And

when you eat a lot of sticky rice, it feels like a bowling ball in your belly. You better not sit down or lay down for several hours.

So I would stand up in the shade of my kuti, which was up on stilts. In the jungle, you put things up on stilts so that the creepy crawlies don't come to bed with you. I was standing in the shade because the sun was up and it was hot. But the flies congregate in the shade. The monk's robes come down to about your knee, a little below your knee, and there are your bare legs and feet for the flies to play with. So I would keep a little tea towel in my hand, and I'd be standing, standing, standing, and then I'd feel this itchy crawling—flies crawling on my legs and feet—and I would flick it like a horsetail. They would fly up and off for a minute. Standing, standing, flick, flick. I would stand this way for two or three hours, just until I got my meal digested and could get a little more comfortable without falling asleep.

One day I was standing there and I felt something on my foot. It didn't feel like a fly. So I opened my eyes. You know what it's like after you eat a big meal—you're kind of dull, kind of lethargic, barely staying mindful. There was this snake going across my foot, and it was a big snake. Let me watch my musāvādā here—it was three or four feet. It was big. And I didn't have any problem with my urgency to practice. I felt a great spiritual urgency to be awake.

When I moved quickly, the snake took off, and it didn't go into the jungle. It went to the nearest tree and went up the tree.

Now I realized that the posts holding up my cabin were totally ineffective. If a snake can climb a tree, it can climb the post that my sleeping platform rested on. Sometimes our spiritual urgency comes in the most mundane ways.

But staying healthy, having good health—that's a condition for making right effort.

The third quality of right effort is sincerity. And it's important to consider what sincerity means, because all of us are here. We've made a lot of effort to get here, to be here. There's a certain sincerity in our wanting to be here, in coming here. And yet I'm sure you've discovered those times in your day when your practice is more casual than sincere, more just getting by than really making determined effort.

Sincerity refers to walking your talk. We want to practice. We want to be awakened. We want to be good yogis. We want to be diligent. We want to be worthy of the teaching. We want to be worthy of the efforts that everyone's making. And yet it's difficult to sustain that sincerity.

Sincerity really involves commitment. In the first month-long retreat we had here, there was a woman who was celebrating her twentieth anniversary of being in AA, right in the middle of the retreat. Twenty years of going to AA meetings every day, often two or three a day. I said to her, "Wow, that's quite a commitment you have to AA—to taking care of yourself and really getting a handle on this condition you have." She said, "Yes." I said, "It must get easier as you go on." She said, "No. Every day it's a decision. It's a recommitment every day to that decision made twenty years before."

And that's really how commitments are made—moment by moment. We don't make a commitment once and then say, "Oh, there, that's it. I've made a commitment to this practice. I've made a commitment to this relationship. I've made a commitment to this behavior or refraining from this behavior." And then it happens automatically. It doesn't work that way. Sustaining a commitment means reconfirming that decision, reconfirming that intention, moment after moment after moment. And yet it does build up a certain momentum, a certain quality of repetition and habit, and of course that provides a lot of support.

I mention this because it's important for us in practice to notice the times when our practice is less than sincere. You know how easy it is to start a bad habit? If you can get through the first time—all of the fear and the shame and the humiliation of doing it that first time—the second time comes easy. And so too with unskillful practice habits. If we allow ourselves to really hang out with unskillful practice habits, doing casual practice, insincere practice, just kind of drifting—and we know, we feel it—then it sets up a permission and the beginnings of a habit, which the more frequently we engage, the less likely we are to see it.

And so we want to see it. We want to see those times in our practice when we are less than sincere, so that we can catch that kind of practice and put it aside.

It takes a lot of willingness to stay in this practice. And I often ask you when you come to report on difficult experiences: Are you willing to look at it? Are you willing to open to it? Are you willing to be present with it? Are you willing to acknowledge it? Are you willing to feel it?

Practice is about being willing—at least willing. It's not overcoming. It's not defeating. It's not uprooting. It's not getting rid of. It's: Are you willing to put aside your fear, your inertia, your judgments of yourself, and to feel it, to open to it, to check it out?

Sincerity is really the quality of our intention and the continuity of our action. It's the only way that sincerity gets any grounding—through actually following through with our intention.

Confidence, health, sincerity. The fourth element of right effort is energy. And it's kind of paradoxical in this practice that we come and a lot of the instruction is to not do. We practice doing nothing—mindfully, with awareness. And that takes, as somebody said, a lot of energy not to do anything other than pay attention.

So what kind of energy are we talking about when we talk about energy for right effort? I talked about the energy of just settling in, overcoming your inertia, exhaustion, tiredness. I talked about the energy of sustaining your intention and attention on your primary objects, sustaining your willingness to just follow the schedule.

Another kind—or another quality, another quantum leap really—in energy comes when we meet difficulty, when we meet dukkha. Here we have two kinds of energy that we want to acknowledge. One is the energy of persevering, being willing to play the edge of what we can tolerate—what we can tolerate

for fear, for pain, for sleepiness, for any of the hindrances, for insecurity. And we play that edge. Playing the edge is the way that we expand our capacity.

Christopher Titmus, one of my early teachers and another teacher of the Dharma, said that one of his teachers used to draw a line in the sand in Thailand and say, "Practice is all about coming to your edge and taking one step over the line." It's not taking a radical leap beyond your capacity into the unknown. It's just taking a single step beyond what you believe to be your limit, your edge, as far as you can go.

One way to do that in working with pain, for example, is when you meet overwhelming pain, to ask yourself, "If this pain doesn't get any worse, can I be with it?" And often, if we can somehow believe that the pain doesn't get any worse, we can be with it. Much of our difficulty or resistance in dealing with pain is the thought or the belief that it's only going to get worse. And that defeats us before we actually meet our limit of what we can tolerate and what we're willing to open to.

Another way of dealing with pain or intense demanding emotion is to ask yourself, "Can I be with this discomfort for another five seconds?" Give yourself permission to move. Give yourself permission to open your eyes—whatever it is you've got to do—and then say, "Can I be with it for five more seconds?" And often, just that placing a limit on what we have to tolerate allows us to relax, open, and be at ease, really, with what, up until then, was unbearable.

We use these little tricks of the mind to extend ourselves into the unknown, incrementally increasing our capacity, just bit by bit. And over the course of a day, a week, a month, years of practice, we grow in capacity. We grow in our ability to tolerate, our ability to play the edge, and the edge changes, moves.

Early on in my practice, I heard about this monk from Burma that I mentioned—the one who was in the cave for thirty-three years. Not only was he in the cave, he didn't lay down for fifty years. He sat up doing his practice. At night when he wanted to sleep, he sat up. So I thought, "Hey, that's a good practice. I'll try that." Where did I get this idea?

I remember one night during a retreat at the Meditation Center in Massachusetts, I said, "I'm going to sit up tonight, all night. I'm not going to lay down when I go to bed." This was a little bit too much of a leap for me. It was so excruciatingly painful. After an hour or two, I laid down. I said, "Forget it. That's the end of my commitment. I'm out of here. I'm getting some sleep."

When we bite off more than we can chew, we choke.

Later, after years of practicing in Burma, I went to Malaysia and was practicing in a monastery there, and I decided again that it might be interesting to experiment with not laying down, just to see what happens. I'd been told it's pretty easy, actually. Once you get past the first night or two, then you learn how to sleep sitting up, and it's really no problem.

So I was more mature, both in my practice and my understanding, and my ambition, I guess. And it's

actually not so difficult. When you're practicing and just being relaxed, when you get tired, you simply collapse a little bit. You fall asleep and you wake up. When you wake up, you're already practicing. You don't waste time.

There are degrees of this, you know. The Buddha talked about his teaching being the middle path between the extremes of indulgence in sensual pleasure and the extreme of mortification of the flesh. In between those two is happy comfort of mind and body. Except that the Buddha did allow some of these what are called dhutanga practices. There are, I think, eleven or thirteen practices that he would allow the monks to undertake. One of them was sitting up. One of them is eating only one meal a day, and a few other things. But one of them was sitting up. And even with that, there are degrees of sitting up. There are those who are allowed to use a back support and those who don't. So depending on where you are in practice, there's always an edge to play. There's always an edge, no matter where you are. You can come to your edge and take one step, one little bit more.

Many of you, Kamala mentioned to me today, have been reporting that you're waking up before the wake-up bell. The wake-up bell is at five o'clock, and people are waking up at four-thirty, four o'clock, three-thirty, three o'clock. And so I ask you, when you wake up and you have enough sleep, is it possible to extend yourself and start practicing? Is it possible?

We have beliefs about how much sleep we need. In our everyday life, when we work, in social life and whatnot, we may need seven hours, eight hours, nine hours, whatever it is you've seen you need in order to be efficient and effective during the day. But in practice, in intensive practice, everything is changing. How much you eat changes, how much sleep you need changes, how much energy you have changes. Be willing to explore. Enter the practice, enter this expansion of your practice with a kind of curiosity, not with a demand like my foolish attempt to sit up too early in practice. But explore the possibility. Explore the fear you have. Explore the resistance that comes, the belief you have about yourself being able or not able to do it. And then see what you can do.

Okay, so now I've been talking about effort and energy and extending yourself a little bit. Are you evaluating yourself now? Are you evaluating? Are you measuring and comparing and determining how much effort you made? Are you judging yourself?

Right effort has nothing to do with judging yourself. We do. We do. We measure ourselves, we compare ourselves, we hear these stories and we say, "Oh my God, I'm never going to make it." Right effort is about finding our own balance. I'm talking about finding your edge and taking one step beyond that. And if it's too far, if it's too big a step, you'll know. Because then you'll meet judgment and fear and exhaustion and a loss of confidence. Playing the edge can build confidence, a lot of confidence, while expanding capacity.

In the center where I was practicing in Burma, they have a general guidance for yogis. And Sayadaw U Pandita would tell us, "When you practice, act like a deaf, dumb, blind, sick person." Blind—don't look around. Deaf—don't listen around. Dumb—don't talk around. And ill—slow down.

Why do we do that? Why do we limit our engagement with the world?

To conserve energy. To preserve energy. When we look around, when we listen around, when we're moving around fast—not always, but it can be very unmindful—it becomes a dissipation of energy. That's the energy we need to conserve in order to build up the heat necessary to cook our practice, to break through, to extend ourselves beyond our current limits.

We do teach, as you know, walking practice, standing practice, sitting practice, which involves listening, seeing, and even walking fast. So it's not universally true that you can't do these things. When you do them, of course, you do them with mindfulness. But when we do them unmindfully, then it's a leak in our energy. It dissipates our energy.

Perhaps the most necessary or useful understanding for finding your own place of right effort, balance in your effort, is to talk about consistency. Finding your pace, finding your rhythm, and keeping with it. Just keeping with it. Just slowly, just incrementally expanding. Not making huge leaps and bounds, but being consistent.

There's a little trouble with the ovens here at this retreat center. When you set the oven for 350 degrees, it sometimes hovers around 350, sometimes hovers around 315. And you never know. If the recipe calls for 350 for 45 minutes, it means 350 for 45 minutes. You can't turn it up to 500 and hope to get done in half an hour. Neither can you leave it at 200 and hope to get done in two hours. It requires 350 for 45 minutes.

Practice is like that. Find your pace. Find your energy level. Work with it. Be consistent. Challenge yourself, for sure—but this approach is much more productive than huge effort followed by huge collapse. If we overextend ourselves one day, we'll be severely depleted for the next two weeks.

There's a story of a very enthusiastic novice who came to the monastery and went to the abbot and said, "I want to get enlightened."

The abbot had some wisdom. "Oh, really?"

"Yeah, I really want to get enlightened. I want to do it as fast as I can. How long is it going to take?"

The abbot said, "Oh, it's going to take you ten years."

"Ten years? Oh my God! What if I work double time, day and night, work really hard, strive harder?"

The abbot says, "Twenty years."

"Well, what if I don't stop, just day and night, stay up all the time, practice really diligently, make every effort?"

"Thirty years."

The novice says, "How come? The more effort I make like that, the longer it's going to take?"

And the abbot said, "Well, if you keep one eye on the goal, you've only got one eye to find the path."

The path is the step before you. The next step that you must take is the path. Where you're going, where you hope to get—that's the goal. Forget it. Find where you are right now. How much energy do you need to take the next step?

We've been sitting here listening to a talk for nearly an hour. I'm going to ask you to become mindfully aware of your body.

Feel your body sitting right now. Sitting on the cushion or bench or chair. You feel what that feels like? How much effort did that take? How much effort did it take to be mindful right in that moment, or right in this moment? Almost nothing. That's how much effort and energy is required in each moment of practice. Almost nothing.

But what makes that amount of energy so valuable and so extraordinary is the precision with which we apply it. You can have a lot of energy scattered all over the place and not be mindful at all. You just overshoot the mark all the time. Hypervigilant, we call it. You can be really amped up and never land in the present moment, because the energy is excessive and the application is imprecise. It's in the precision of your aiming your attention that you actually land on the present moment. And for that, very little energy is required.

My father used to work on microwave towers—you know, those towers that send radio beams across great distances and carry lots of phone messages. They've got these great big towers, these great big receiving dishes, and all kinds of heavy-duty equipment. He asked me one time, "Do you know how much energy goes between one of those stations and the other?" I could only imagine this huge nuclear reactor amount of energy zapping out from one tower to the other. And he said, "No, it's some fraction of a watt. It's almost nothing." But the precision with which they're aimed and carry the energy—or whatever it is that they're carrying—is what makes them so powerful, so unique, so valuable.

The same with our mindfulness. The quality of our attention, where we're directing our attention, the precision with which we're directing it into the present moment—this makes all the difference in the world as to how awake we are. Finding our own way, finding what is the place of balance in the middle for us. Not easy, and it's ever-changing. What worked today might not work tomorrow. It requires that precise attention in the moment to know what is appropriate for me now, and being willing to meet the need. Whatever's needed, be willing to raise that amount of energy and open to the experience.

I want to end with a short Zen story. One of the devotees in the temple was well known for his zealousness and his effort. Day and night he would sit in meditation, not stopping even to eat or sleep. As time passed, he grew thinner and more exhausted. The master of the temple advised him to slow down, to take more care of himself, but the devotee refused to heed his advice.

"Why are you rushing so? What is your hurry?" asked the master.

"I'm after enlightenment," replied the devotee. "There is no time to waste."

"And how do you know," asked the master, "that enlightenment is running on before you so that you have to rush after it? Perhaps it is behind you, and all you need to encounter it is to stand still. But you are running away from it."

So let us sit still for a minute, and maybe it will catch up with us.

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