Wise Effort

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 49:35

What I would like to talk about this evening is the question of wise effort.

I'd like to begin with a story, but first let me explain that I didn't make this story up, and therefore I don't mean to offend Catholics nor to praise Buddhists.

A Zen master was once invited to a great Catholic monastery to give instruction in Zen practice. He exhorted the monks there to meditate and to try to solve their koan, or Zen question, with great energy and zeal. He told them that if they could practice with full-hearted effort, true understanding would come to them.

One old monk raised his hand. "Master," he said, "our way of prayer is different than this. We've been meditating and praying in the simplest fashion, without effort, waiting instead to be illuminated by the grace of God. In Zen, is there anything like this illuminating grace that comes to one uninvited?"

The Zen master looked back and responded, "In Zen, we believe that God has already done his share."

The question of effort is one of the most crucial questions we encounter in meditation. It's very clear that in our lives, as well as in our meditation, some quality of effort is required if we are really going to deepen or bring to fulfillment anything that we truly honor and value. Probably the only thing in our lives that doesn't take a great deal of effort is going to sleep. Everything else, if we really value it, requires our attention—requires us to attend to it in a conscious and caring way.

In meditation, in this practice, we are initiating a movement. In many ways we're also reaching for qualities of mind and heart which we sense are possible within ourselves but which may not be fully present. We come to meditation often seeking understanding and seeking for changes to take place. And that understanding and those changes may exist somewhat apart from our actual experience in this moment.

We probably all have different objectives in meditation. But the qualities of calm, of spaciousness, of peace, the quality of open-heartedness, the possibility of awakening—these are what attract many of us to this path. I feel all of us have enough life experience by now that we really don't believe that much in fairy godmothers anymore, and we acknowledge that no one can make a gift of these changes to us. No one can wrap these qualities in a package and present them to us.

We probably also recognize, perhaps somewhat reluctantly, that fantasy, resolutions, desires, and yearning tend to do very little to bring about the changes that we truly honor and seek. And often, at this

point in our lives and meditation, there's a deep acknowledgement that no one else apart from us can make changes for us. No one can substitute for us in traveling this path, in bringing about the emergence of wisdom and love. The effort that is really needed must come from within ourselves. The effort needs to be born within ourselves.

In meditation practice, effort is always talked about. It's a major part of developing this practice. It is one of the links in the Eightfold Path. It's one of the factors of enlightenment. And it's not just effort alone that is spoken of in this practice—what is spoken of is right effort, a word we sometimes have trouble with. We see that if there is such a thing praised as right effort, it clearly implies that there's such a thing as wrong effort. And if we understand that right effort essentially directs us towards the development of mindfulness, towards awakening, then it wouldn't be illogical to assume that wrong effort is going to take us in the opposite direction—that wrong effort might well lead us into greater confusion, conflict, and limitation.

I feel there are many things that we can be very grateful to the Buddha for. One of them is that he spent a whole lot of time developing wrong effort. As a matter of fact, he spent years doing it. This is not my interpretation—he quite honestly admitted this. He spent years pursuing paths and approaches to meditation which essentially led to dead ends. He spent years developing self-denial and self-punishment; this was a particular path he followed for a period of time and perfected very well. He spent years following the path of indulgence in ways much better than we've probably done. He spent a lot of time exploring the whole avenue of control and a lot of time exploring the extremes, becoming an intimate master of asceticism.

We should be grateful, because essentially this could save us a great deal of time. If we can listen and perhaps even learn from what he did, we don't need to follow the same avenues in order to learn the same lessons—that wrong effort basically consumes energy and leads to limitation and confusion.

Understandably, we have tendencies that make us at times reluctant, and sometimes wisely reluctant, to accept the experience of another. We might tell ourselves that clearly the Buddha was a different person than we are, and what didn't work for him might very well work for us. We often have a feeling that we have to experience everything through our own eyes before we can trust it. It's clear that no one here, or anywhere else, can actually stop us from engaging in wrong effort. No one even necessarily knows, unless we tell them, that we're engaging in great ascetic practices or efforts at control. No one can actually prevent us.

But we still need to look at our own quality of effort in this practice. If we find ourselves repeatedly involved in struggle, in conflict, in pain during meditation...

It is very worthwhile asking ourselves to pay attention to what is actually going on—to really pay attention to the quality of effort that we are using in our practice, to really pay attention to our very approach to meditation. If you have spent days, never mind years, going through the same things,

struggling with the same issues, coming to the same blocks or obstacles, going through the same extremes, then it is time and worthwhile for all of us to ask ourselves and to really look at our very approach to the practice.

It's not difficult for us to discern and to understand what wrong effort is. And wrong, I know, is a kind of charged word, but we could use unwise or unskillful. It's not difficult to discern what unskillful effort is. If you find that there are difficult mental states that continue, that don't change, that we experience in exactly the same way again and again; if we find ourselves assaulted by or feeling invaded by a repetitive process of thinking, of thought patterns that weigh like a stone in our minds; if we find ourselves struggling and battling and warring with ourselves or filled with resistance—all of these experiences really do tell us a great deal about the quality of our attention. They don't necessarily tell us a great deal about who we are, but they can tell us a great deal about the quality of our attention, the kind of effort that we're making.

Sometimes what happens when you find something repeating itself again and again, when you find yourself up against the same walls and the same edges, is that we conclude we're experiencing this problem because of the contents of our minds—because of the problem or the issue or the memory or the image that keeps arising again and again. We conclude often that it's the kind of thoughts and feelings we're experiencing that are responsible for struggle, responsible for conflict and difficulty.

When we conclude or believe that the difficulty lies in the contents of our minds, in who we are, in what we're experiencing, what we tend to do is become very busy with strategies. We bring out our fix-it mind. How can I fix it? How can I make it different? How can I have a different kind of thought, a better one? How can I have a different kind of feeling or a different kind of memory? How can I have a different kind of fantasy even? We get involved in strategies of either trying to subdue what we're experiencing or trying to alter it, or we find ourselves responding with blame and judgment. I'm obviously a hopeless spiritual failure because I keep repeating and experiencing these same terrible thoughts.

If we're honest with ourselves, I doubt if anybody invited the contents of their minds in today. Maybe now and again. But how much of what you've experienced today in terms of content—thoughts, feelings, memories—did you actually invite? Did you get up this morning and say, "Well, this is a great day to be depressed"? Or finish your lunch and say, "You know, I haven't been angry for a while. A little anger wouldn't go amiss. Let's spend the rest of the day storming"?

How responsible do we feel for the contents of our minds? Often terribly responsible. We become so responsible for the contents of our minds, and at times so busy in trying to alter them, that what we miss or perhaps omit to do is to look at our relationship to them—to give the primary attention not to the contents but to our actual relationship to them in the moment that they arise.

As far as I understand, meditation is really not very concerned with redecorating our minds. Instead of the busyness of the strategies, instead of the blame and the judgment, sometimes it is really helpful to ask

ourselves: What kind of energy are we bringing to our experience? What kind of effort do we make in relationship to our thoughts and feelings, in relationship to the pleasant and to the unpleasant?

There is surely nothing that is more guaranteed to perpetuate and reinforce mental states and thoughts and feelings and images than avoidance and holding. Resistance and clinging give a solidity to whatever arises within our bodies, feelings, and minds.

The second question I feel it's important to ask ourselves is: Do we actually need to? Do we actually have to experience this constant repetition? Do we have to experience this kind of solidity and all the struggling and the resistances that are born of it?

It may be that we don't seem to have much choice at times over the contents of our minds, but that doesn't imply that we have no choice in our relationship to them. It doesn't mean that we have no freedom in our relationship to what we actually experience. It doesn't imply that we have no choice and no freedom in the quality of energy and the quality of effort that we're able to bring to whatever we experience.

Wise effort or skillful effort—it's not difficult to define. It is simply the effort to be mindful. It is simply the effort to be awake and conscious. A quality of mindfulness, as Carol was speaking about yesterday, that brings us closer to the present moment, to our actual experience of it. And in coming closer to the present moment, we really begin to develop a sense of clear comprehension.

Clear comprehension means seeing without filters, without projection, without likes and dislikes, without prejudice, without judgments, without shoulds. It means just clear comprehension. There is very little in this world that calls upon us for our evaluation in terms of good, bad, wrong, right, negative, positive. Clear comprehension in a very real way means being able to clear ourselves of those filters, to connect with what we're actually experiencing. And that allows not only deepening in meditation, but it is what is the primary ingredient in letting go.

Unless we clearly comprehend what we're experiencing, it's quite impossible to let go of it, to let go of anything. Unless we clearly connect with what's actually going on, it becomes so difficult to let go, no matter how many times in our minds we say, "I must let go of this." As long as our experience is layered with projections, with likes and dislikes, it is almost impossible to have that freedom of simply letting it be.

If you have any acquaintance with Buddhism, one of the things you're probably aware of is that Buddhism is well known for its lists. Whoever wrote out the scriptures of the Buddha had an incredibly orderly mind, because there's list after list after list. And of course there is a list about effort. The Buddha spoke about the four noble efforts, sometimes even translated as the four heroic efforts—which might be a little extreme. If these efforts are misunderstood, they very easily lead to striving and judgment. But it's important to know the different possibilities of effort that are helpful in this practice.

The first noble effort that the Buddha spoke of was the effort to foster and enhance skillful qualities of being that are already part of our makeup. These qualities are not strangers to us: sensitivity, openness,

generosity, our capacity to allow, to give, to let go, to understand. All of these are skillful qualities of our being. To enhance and foster them means making the effort to consciously develop them.

I have to say that for many Westerners this is an extraordinarily difficult task—more difficult, I think, than for people in the East. We have a long history of learning how to focus on the negative, the imperfect, the faults, the weaknesses and failings within ourselves. If asked, most people can make lists of their own imperfections. We have extensive training in giving attention to them, in trying to do things with them. It's not always easy for us to honor and respect those parts of our being which are so rich, so wholesome, so conducive to well-being.

Many people actually find themselves feeling guilty. In meditation, something arises—a real openness, some breakthrough in sensitivity—and there's difficulty in acknowledging it. "Well, I had this moment today, but it'll probably go away. I'm sure it'll be gone by lunchtime and I'll be angry again. Or it's probably my hormones or something—I'm sure it's an accident." How difficult many people find it to actually trust and honor within themselves what is rich, opening, conducive, wholesome. We don't have that difficulty with the negative. We don't struggle to emphasize and highlight all that is wrong.

In a very real way, this retraining of energy, this redirecting of appreciation and gratitude inwardly, of sensitivity and loving attention inwardly, is one of the hardest tasks for us to develop in meditation. To foster and enhance that which is wholesome, that which is rich and truly opening, means that in every moment such qualities arise—a moment of sensitivity, compassion, generosity, or allowing—we become totally, deeply acquainted with that experience, experientially and intimately, within our minds and bodies.

Every time we experience a moment of peace, rather than dismissing it or holding our breath while we wait for it to disappear, we can explore deeply what that quality is within ourselves. It came from within. It didn't fall from the fan. It came from within ourselves. What does it feel like? What does it feel like in our bodies and in our feelings? What difference do these qualities make in the way we see ourselves? In the presence of these qualities, what difference do they make in how we hold the world around us, how we hold others? We go deeply into them, explore them.

We foster and enhance these qualities, these parts of our being, not through clinging and not through holding—not by thinking, "Here's this moment and I better grab it before it disappears"—but rather through investigation. In those moments when rich qualities of being arise within ourselves, we see clearly the factors that made them possible. They may seem like accidents, but they are not accidents. We see clearly the factors that actually allowed them to arise.

Sensitivity and openness and compassion are not a question of luck, not a question of accidental encounter or of karma. The factors that allow these qualities to emerge within ourselves are the very capacity to let go, to connect, to open. And we know how true that is when we really are able to let go, when we really are deeply able to connect, when we're deeply able to open—how out of that comes forth

this blossoming, this emergence of a real taste of sensitivity, a real taste of compassion. Love is born out of our capacity to let go and to connect. These are the factors that make it possible.

And are those factors of letting go, opening, connecting accidental? Is it just a random occurrence, that maybe we'll be lucky today and have something we can let go of? Or are letting go and opening and connecting real qualities of mind that we're consciously able to cultivate?

It's so important to remind ourselves that when we speak about conscious effort, it implies the absence of passivity. It means that we don't simply sit here, waiting in hope to be struck by a bolt of enlightenment or struck by a moment of compassion.

It doesn't mean either that we strive for them and reach for them, trying to make ourselves compassionate, trying to make ourselves let go. It really means consciously directing our attention and our energy toward our own capacities of being that are already present within ourselves.

The second noble effort the Buddha spoke of was not to become entangled in unwholesome, unskillful states that arise. Wiser words are hardly ever spoken. We could probably make lists again of unwholesome and unskillful states that we have experienced in the past and in the present. Even throughout today, it's not difficult for us to define what is unskillful. It causes pain, very simply. The unskillful states, the unskillful qualities, they cause pain. It's really nothing more than that. They cause separation, division, disconnection, conflict. Anger and greed—whatever leads to disconnection—creates pain and is an unskillful state that it is wise not to become entangled in.

I would say that it does take a certain effort to sustain the unskillful. There's very little in this world that is sustained through its own momentum. It does take a certain effort to sustain the unskillful, but we are often not conscious of it. When states of mind or feelings or images or projections or judgments arise, it often does seem that they have a life of their own, that they're somehow part of us and they just intrude and continue for a while until they pass away. But the energy that sustains negativity or anger or greed or jealousy or hatred—the energy that sustains those states of mind—is the energy of dwelling, the energy of holding, the energy of feeding them. This is what sustains those unskillful states of mind that bring us pain.

And it's not a question of judging that. It's really much more a question of whether we are able to redirect that energy. Think of the energy that is in judgment. Think of the energy that is in blame and in anger. It's a fantastic energy. The way that it goes may not be too helpful, but the energy itself is fantastic. Are we able to redirect it so that we don't feed into that which brings us pain? Are we able to bring that energy to truly make us mindful of what is arising and our relationship to it? We may unconsciously dwell upon things, but dwelling upon things is not a life sentence. It is not as if we're going to be there forever. Can we, in the moment of dwelling, in the moment of experiencing states of mind that bring pain, consciously cultivate spaciousness, openness, letting go?

Meditation is not only a conscious application of effort. I feel that such a major part of meditation is vision. It is really developing a deep sense of trust and faith in our own possibilities, in our own potential. And part of that trust and faith is trusting in our own capacity to open and to let go. Sometimes letting go of things is a very organic process, a very natural process. Sometimes letting go also comes through quite conscious determination.

Now when we hear the word determination, sometimes we get kind of antsy and think, "Well, aha, determination equals suppression." But I would make a distinction. To me, suppression is the unwillingness to see something. Determination, to me, is the clear seeing of something and the unwillingness to engage in something that we intuitively know is going to bring pain and conflict. And to me this is an incredibly important distinction.

Sometimes we have the conviction—we see difficult states of mind of anger and greed or envy arising, and we feel that these memories and these feelings must be arising for a purpose, that all things have their purpose in this cosmos. Especially in meditation cycles, we conceive of the purpose of this repetition as being that we haven't yet learned what we need to learn. And that's why it keeps arising.

Sometimes this is true. I would also say that in my experience, there's not that much new that arises in terms of thoughts. How many really new thoughts have you had today? How many truly unique, brand new, fresh images have you experienced today? In my experience there aren't that many. Many of the things that keep repeating themselves—actually we've already learned what we need to learn. How many things that we repeat have we already actually learned what we need to learn? The repetition is more habitual than a process of learning.

If we appreciate this—sometimes new things arise and then it's really worth reflection and inquiry and full attention. But if we see that we're simply replaying and repeating, then there's a place for skillful, conscious determination not to become entangled. It's like if you have a toothache. It could be quite helpful to hang out with it for a few days and learn about your relationship to pain.

So very similar with many of our repetitions—there's a point actually where we're not learning anymore, where actually we're punishing ourselves. And there's a point when there is some real conscious determination to see and not to be entangled.

The third quality of effort, the third noble effort, is to encourage and foster skillful qualities of being which have not yet arisen. It's hard to figure out how to do that. It seems somewhat of a challenge. How do we encourage something which has not yet arisen without getting involved in denial of what is, or getting involved in striving? How do we encourage the skillful without bouncing back between rejection and craving?

It's not an easy balance to find, and yet it's so much of what meditation is about, isn't it? I mean, if we were all fully enlightened and fully compassionate and fully awake and loving and wise human beings, we

probably wouldn't feel that much call to be here. What we actually come here for is really to seek for qualities, to move towards qualities which may not be present in our lives. What attracts us to meditation is not to experience yet more of the same, not to have a closer intimacy with a chaotic mind or with sore knees or with pain. What attracts us to meditation is the possibility of change, the sense of possibility emerging within ourselves—of qualities, of potential that may not be right now present in our lives. Whether it's freedom, whether it's equanimity, whether it's clarity, whether it's open-heartedness, it is true in meditation that we're initiating a journey and a movement. And part of that, there is a quality of reaching for what is not here.

What I feel the important distinction is, is not reaching for clarity, for compassion, for love or for wisdom as some future destination or as some personal possession. To me this is wrong effort. What is more skillful and wise effort is to clearly acknowledge that sense of possibility within ourselves, acknowledge clearly our capacity to be truly compassionate, truly awake, truly loving. Is it possible in this moment, in the midst of whatever we are experiencing, no matter how difficult, no matter how unpleasant? If it brings us back to this moment, to me it is wise effort.

It's so difficult for us at times not to think in a linear way—that the positive is going to come about as a result of getting rid of the negative, or that we're going to experience peace when we've got rid of the disturbing, or we're going to experience happiness when we've got rid of pain. We tend to think in such linear ways. And I think what meditation really suggests to us is a whole other way of thinking, a whole other way of seeing. What it suggests to us is the possibility of finding spaciousness in the moment that we're experiencing contraction, of finding a place of stillness amidst the greatest busyness, of finding a place of clarity even as the mind is going through places of confusion—the possibility of bringing clarity to this, of finding equanimity in those moments when we feel imbalanced.

Unfortunately, we grow up on a diet that suggests to us that seeking perfection or realizing perfection is what our lives are all about. Everything in our culture suggests to us the desirability of pursuing perfection, whether it's the perfect apple in the supermarket, whether it's a perfect lifestyle, whether it's a perfect body. And I feel we absorb this a great deal, and too often we are simply victims of our own delusions about perfection.

It seems to me that one of life's greatest challenges is in how we respond to the imperfect. I don't know about you, but I never expect my mind to be perfect. I never expect to have the perfect personality. I never expect that my life is going to come to a point where there is no crisis, where there is nothing to respond to. Quite frankly, to let go of our illusions about perfection is to lay down a tremendous burden. Think of the suffering that is created in the pursuit of perfection.

Now that doesn't mean a kind of passivity and resignation—that life is imperfect, too bad, and suffering is what it's all about. Just recognizing that there's very little in this world that fits in with our ideas of perfection, and there are very few times possibly when reality can conform to our images and our

expectations. It is an actuality that we are actually never going to erase the past. It's also an actuality that our futures are going to remain uncertain and without guarantees. Our essential challenge as human beings is how we respond to all of this.

In the midst of anger, can we call forth love? In the midst of resentment, can we bring forth forgiveness? In the midst of pain, can we find a place of calmness within ourselves that knows no denial? In the midst of confusion, can we summon forth awareness to bring clarity? These are our resources and these are our possibilities. And the effort that we use is to make the space, to make the inner environment in which those resources and those possibilities can emerge and can transform.

There's that wonderful saying of Don Juan, that to an ordinary person, everything in life is either a blessing or a curse, whereas to a wise person, everything is a challenge. And I feel that many of life's obstacles that we meet present us with the possibility of really discovering new depths of openness and compassion and understanding.

The fourth effort the Buddha spoke about was the effort to avoid the unskillful which has not yet arisen. Now again, that seems slightly paranoid. And avoidance does carry certain associations for us too—it's a very bad spiritual word.

Avoidance is considered really totally a no-no. You're not spiritual if you avoid anything. You're not open if you avoid anything at all.

But I think before we get too carried away with our associations, it is actually helpful to reflect a little bit. Reflect on the past. Is there anything in your life you have experienced which you know intuitively, directly brought pain, conflict, suffering, alienation—that you know would actually be wiser not to get into again?

Reflect in the present. Have you experienced in the days here states of mind that bring distress and sadness? States of mind that bring contraction and limitation? Ways of reacting that breed discontent? It might be fairly wise not to become entangled in them.

Think even in terms of the future. Do we see the mind reaching with ambitiousness, with goals, with striving that again create pain? Would it not be wise not to engage? Is it not also wise at times to avoid that which we know we do not have the resources present within ourselves in that moment to be with skillfully? There are times when stepping back and stepping out can be very skillful action.

Just one last thing about effort I would like to mention, and that is to look at the difference between intensity and passion. Sometimes in meditation people become very entangled in intensity and they mistake this for wise effort. They become so focused on getting somewhere and on goals that there's a rejection and denial of the present moment. Or they become so focused on being a perfect yogi that they become very judgmental of others and righteous. Or they become so concentrated on being concentrated that they become very tense and narrow.

To me, this kind of intensity is actually a real hindrance in the practice, because it tends to deny those qualities of softness and openness which are the essence of wise effort. Wise effort is not born of intensity, but of a certain quality of passion.

I feel in this practice that what is needed is much more than a lukewarm curiosity about transformation, much more than an ambivalence about whether we might be more peaceful or not. What is much more helpful is a real passion for clarity and understanding, a real commitment to openness and to love and to freedom.

Out of that passion, there comes inspiration—a willingness to open to and embrace each moment that arises as our teacher. Intensity has goals and passion has love. This is the basic difference. Passion has a love of clarity and a love of stillness, not in the future, but a love that brings us closer to this moment that we're experiencing, to understand its possibilities and to understand our own potential. Intensity always takes us further away from this moment.

From that inspiration comes interest, comes energy, comes effort to see and to explore both who we are and who we can be. To see and explore not only what we're experiencing, but how we can experience it. To see and explore this moment and ourselves just as we are.

In that wise effort, in that skillful effort, the path and the goal are not separate. They are just one and the same.

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