# Balanced Energy

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:05:37

Hopefully what I speak about tonight will be in the service of helping us begin to be able to evaluate our practice from the terms of balance rather than looking at it in terms of progress. It's a shift from worrying about what's happening to simply being, able to evaluate what's the balance of mental factors, what's the balance of energy here. It's a really different way to relate to what's going on, and it takes a lot of the suffering out.

This is my only current reading that I can share with you this talk—from the front of a magazine in the supermarket. Cosmopolitan. This is advertising an article which I did not read. It says, "Just when you've found perfect happiness, it's gone. No, but that's not the end. How to get it back." That's not what I'm promising tonight. That's progress. That's not what we're looking for.

So this notion of balance—and specifically I want to talk about the mental factor of energy, sometimes translated as effort. It came up the other morning in the questions when I was here, this question about how sometimes we give instructions for very precise, focused concentration, connecting with experience, and sometimes we talk about resting in spaciousness, open awareness. But the trick is this: open awareness must be vivid, alert, wakeful. And this precise, connected quality, this tremendous energy that we put out, has to also be effortless. How do we do that? That's a good question.

A lot of the ways or models in which one can speak about this practice of insight meditation are ways of looking at balance. For example, for those of you who came to listen to the tape talk last Friday by Sayadaw U Pandita, he spoke about the first of the seven factors of enlightenment, which is mindfulness. Big surprise. But this paradigm, this way of describing our experience as seven mental factors, is one of the ways of looking at our experience, our practice, in terms of balance.

Rather than asking, "Am I having a far-out sitting? Am I feeling happy? Are things really clear?"—or "No, I'm having too much emotion, things are difficult"—really, when you come into interviews, I'll let you in on a secret: we don't really care what's happening. We really don't. What we do care about, often, is looking at how these seven factors of experience, these seven factors of mind, are manifesting. Are they in balance with one another? Are they even present? They are, believe me, they are. But a lot of what we're doing is bringing them into balance with each other. And what particular appearance is manifesting really doesn't make any difference.

These seven qualities: the first is mindfulness. Then there are three energetic qualities, which are investigation—Dhamma investigation, not thinking about things—energy, or sometimes translated as effort, and rapture or joy. And then there are three tranquilizing or calmer qualities: calm or tranquility,

concentration, and equanimity. Tonight I want to talk specifically about the quality of effort or energy. But I just mentioned that one way of understanding balance is within these seven factors. It takes a lot of the identification away if you look at your experience in that way.

The reason I like to use the translation "energy" for the Pali word *viriya* rather than "effort" is because personally, in my experience, I tend to identify more with the word "effort," as if somehow I should be able to control it. In that way, I think it's one of the ways we misinterpret and relate to the quality of energy in a way that brings on suffering—by not recognizing that it's impermanent and that it's not self. For me, it's really easy to identify or take personally, as me or mine, the quality of experience that manifests as energy.

If you keep coming to U Pandita's talks, you'll hear him speak of courageous heroic effort. That's an aspect of it. But if I think I should be putting out courageous heroic effort every moment or else I'm lazy, we run into difficulty when we hit the other aspect of the fact that energy is impermanent and rises and falls.

So how do we come into a relationship that can help us explore what's really happening with an attitude of interested evaluation, skillful means, rather than "I blew it" or "I'm the greatest yogi going"? How do we avoid relating to energy as if it's good and we should push harder and harder and harder until our head is hitting against the wall—in which case we totally give it up? "I'll just give up and take a few days off until it comes back." There's a middle ground here.

And that's what we can learn to work with in exploring this quality of balance—of energy, of effort.

The first aspect I find helpful is learning how to recognize and become comfortable with the experience of effortless energy, those times when there really is this strong, connected quality of energy that is not pushing. It's something Michelle spoke about on Monday: the quality of interest. I just want to make a couple of points about it.

We tend to think, as we know, that when there's interest, clearly the energy is there. It's not such an effort to pay attention. But if we think, "How can I be interested all day in this stuff that's going on?"—it just seems exhausting. Just the idea of getting interested in these things, as if somehow inherently the breath is not interesting or sensations are not interesting. Somewhere we have to crank up artificially this quality of interest, and that takes too much energy, and we don't have energy. So, you know, forget the whole thing.

Instead, we might look at it differently: that interest actually brings the energy, and that each of us has the capability to be really, effortlessly interested for long periods of time. Here we think, "Oh yeah, right. I can't stay with one breath. I can't stay with two breaths."

But how interested are you when you're really involved in working on your computer? I see people just drawn into the computer screen—they can't get away from it for hours. People who might think, "I don't have a very long attention span." Or watching friends watch sports on television. It's actually quite

enthralling to me to watch my friends just glued for hours. They're not saying, "It's so exhausting to pay attention to this sports game. I just don't know if I can keep the attention, the interest going." Quite the contrary. If one were to try to start another conversation, it wouldn't even be heard. Total samadhi on sports. It's fascinating to me, actually.

In this country, it's football. In Europe, it's soccer. I remember when the World Cup was happening—my boyfriend's German, so being American, I never would have turned it on. But he's just as into it as Americans are into the Super Bowl. We were traveling around the country teaching, and everywhere we went we'd have to find a television. We were working at a retreat in California in a convent. We had to dig up a television, bring it into the one free room there, and run in and watch the World Cup in between every free moment. And the interest is infectious, because pretty soon all the women who were cooking for us on the retreat were in there watching too. Then one time we came in and they had already turned it on—they'd been into it for an hour before we'd even arrived. Nobody's saying, "I'm so tired of this." It's very enlivening.

I'll tell you a secret: there's not something inherently interesting about soccer or football that we cannot find in the process of our own life here. It is really so much more interesting than a stupid game on television. Why do we find it so difficult to contact this quality of interest, which in itself brings effortless energy? Interest is not inherent in the particular experience, but we relate as if it's so.

We think, "Well, if something's really intense, I'll get interested." Or in our days here—now we'll come back to the retreat environment and out of football—if what's happening in your sitting or your walking or your eating is really different all of a sudden, or intense, or if it meets some idea you have of what's good practice, then we get interested.

But so often people will come in and say, "Yeah, nothing's happening. It's not very interesting."

I'll say, "Nothing?"

"Oh, yeah, well, sure, there's the breath and there's a lot of calm and sensations come and go and thoughts and emotions."

"So a lot of things are arising and passing and there's calmness?"

"Yeah, yeah, I guess there's a lot of things happening, but it's all so familiar. So it's not that interesting."

I read this in a San Francisco paper a couple of years ago. A young twenty-one-year-old woman born with cystic fibrosis—a lung disease you're born with that gets progressively worse; you rarely live much past thirty. At twenty-one, she had a partial lung transplant from each of her parents to keep her alive longer. And she said—it's quite young and naive, but it's so sweet—she said, "It's so nice to be able to breathe like a normal person. I stand up straight all by myself now, and I don't have blue fingers or blue lips. I love air. It's so nice."

Breathing is the most wonderful feeling that I could ever imagine. It's wonderful.

We don't really know if we're ever going to have another breath. And that's just the fact of life. How can it get so mundane to us? It's so easy for us to lose this quality of interest, of connection that brings everything so alive—that then lets the energy, the effort become much more balanced without our striving so hard.

One thing that happens when we begin to experience what's happening as familiar or a bit mundane, not very interesting, is that really the mindfulness, the attention, is just sort of skimming the surface of experience. That's why there's so much emphasis on experiencing mindfulness as that stone that drops in—a stone that drops in, not that's thrown in. It drops easily by itself. Sometimes it just touches the surface and floats a little, and then if you just let it sit there, it'll start to sink. Even that cork. So many people have come and said, "I don't want to be like the cork. I want to be like the stone." No, no. Even if you just let the cork sit, it'll eventually get waterlogged and sink.

But that's a lot of why the emphasis on mindfulness is sinking in, because when there's that gentle connection, the interest comes back. The breath is interesting. Sensations are interesting. Frustration is interesting. Boredom can even be interesting—when there's just that willingness to touch it with attention. That's why we have such an emphasis on the sinking in quality of mindfulness.

And again, that non-discriminating quality that we've mentioned—of not choosing "this is worth being mindful of and this isn't"—because another way that helps us balance the energy through balancing interest is to balance our perspectives, or balance our perception, our interpretation of experience. And again, I've spoken of this, I'll just touch on it, but the balance is not to get so caught in our evaluations of "this is good practice, this is bad, this is a horrible experience, this shows I'm worthless, this is a great experience, this shows I'm really getting it." All this interpretation is what gets in the way of a commonality of interest and a balanced energy.

Because when we define something as painful, bad, not worth attention, or going in the wrong direction, we tend to pull away or get involved in struggle. Immediately the energy gets out of balance. It turns to pushing. Or, "this is good, this should stay"—again, the energy gets out of balance. It turns to "hold on, hold on, make this happen more."

The only energy or effort that we are cultivating, wise effort, is simply the energy to meet what happens fully. To meet it, to sink in, just as it is. That's all. As soon as it tips over into trying to push away or change or hold on to, we've moved out of balanced energy into striving or aversion, and we start to suffer.

So again, one way, another way that helps us come back to balance is to balance our perspective, our perception. And sometimes a little reflection on our experience can help. Because reflection can be helpful—permitted thinking. You get about three sentences to reflect, and then when the first sentence repeats, it's time to stop and reconnect with something else that's happening. But a little balanced

reflection can be extremely helpful.

So when you're thinking, "Oh no," as for some reason a lot of people—not everybody, but a lot of people in the last couple of days—are like, "Oh no, it's all going to hell now. And it was going so well." And implicit, even though we say, "Well, I know it all comes and goes and I'm just being with it," but often that nub down there: "What did I do wrong? How can I get it back like it was?" Right away you know you're going to be in unbalanced effort, unbalanced energy.

So a little reflection, just to notice. You can't say, "This is good and this is bad, this should be here, this shouldn't." You can't separate the two. Thich Nhat Hanh has a wonderful way of describing it. He says, you know, we love a rose—really beautiful. Garbage—not worth our attention. But if you have a rose long enough, like those beautiful yellow roses up here, they decay and decay, and pretty soon we throw them in the garbage. And they are the garbage. How can you separate them?

Then we take the garbage, turn it into compost, put it on the flower beds, and it grows more roses. You can't separate this is rose and this is garbage. They're absolutely part of each other.

And it's the same in our meditation. You have an incredibly perfect, brilliant day of flowing clear mindfulness—or whatever for you constitutes a perfect, brilliant day, whatever your mind decides is perfect, brilliant practice. And what happens within probably two days maximum? Gone. Gone. And instead, a turmoil of emotion. Overcome with anger or restlessness, lost in a flurry of doubt or self-hatred or whatever it might be, or just plain frustration.

It's so easy to think those are two separate events, when in fact, we can never trace all the causes and effects, but I would posit from my experience that they are absolutely mutually interdependent—both equally vital aspects of the unfolding of our practice. We don't get it all one way. And in fact, most of the really deep understandings that have arisen in my mind in practice and in life, the ones that have really served me, so many of them have come out of the most god-awful times in practice.

Because sometimes, if we can get over our "this is bad, make it go away, try, try, try"—if we can just see that this is also an opening into truth—this absolutely dreadful experience of self-hatred and frustration can be the opening into connecting again with the sublime. When we can have that attitude, the interest comes back and the effort comes back into balance. In other words, the effort stops trying to change it and simply meets it. And then the flower opens by itself.

A poem I like that expresses this, from Izumi Shikibu, a Japanese woman of about the tenth or eleventh century:

*Although the wind blows terribly here,*
*the moonlight also leaks*
*between the roof planks*
*of this ruined house.*

I love it. As we look up because the wind's blowing and the roof planks are exposed and the house is ruined—just when we're ready to get into a rage, we notice the moonlight streaming in. I feel like that a lot. A ruined house with moonlight streaming in. That's our life. That's our practice.

So we're learning, when the interest is there, how to recognize and become familiar with this quality, this mental factor of effortless energy, of balanced effort. Become familiar. Recognize it. Because in the recognition, it becomes easier to find it again.

I've found that when the energy is balanced like that and the interest comes, it's its own reward. One of the ways I know that my energy is balanced is because I really don't care anymore what's happening. That quality of meeting whatever's happening with a fullness of presence is so fulfilling that I really am not needing for what's happening to be better or worse. I'm not needing for something nice to stay. It just feels so wholehearted.

Recognize. You all have that experience at times. Recognize it. Because it will change. There is no way it's not going to change. It doesn't mean we made a mistake. But recognize it, because when it does change, the way we learn how to come into balance is by falling out of balance. That's something Chögyam Trungpa said once. Balance implies a kind of tilting, right? Balance doesn't imply a static sense—"Oh, I've gotten there, I'm balanced, it stays." We get that sense, what it feels like, that wholeheartedness of effortless energy, and then it tips out. Because we learn to recognize its presence, we learn to recognize when it tilts out and how it tilts out. So rather than blaming, it's information.

One way—and maybe it's the most subtle way, but it's probably the most common—is that in a space of wholehearted effort, just being present, really present, one can put out a tremendous quality of energy in this space of balanced wholeheartedness. And then somehow, slightly somewhere, we don't notice, but the motivation shifts a little bit. It doesn't take much. And the energy that we put out, which was just to meet what's happening very fully, moment to moment—

There can come in just a little bit of wanting to change, or "I meet this so that it can open, so that the process can continue." You know, "I will meet this to control it." Or somehow the mind is just leaning forward a little bit into the future, just thinking how this present space is going to turn into something else.

It can be very subtle. You'll find your own way. But you already have your own ways—you'll start to recognize them. And often we don't notice that first change right at the beginning. It can be a little subtle. But it starts to feel different. The quality of effort takes on a kind of tightness, a striving. A little bit we're falling out of balance, or leaning forward, or looking back, rather than being right here.

And maybe we don't notice that. It still feels like we're putting out a really strong effort. This isn't when we've given up. This is when we're heading towards the beating-our-head-against-the-wall phase. Where it goes from feeling fulfilling, it starts to feel a little strained. We begin to feel frustrated. Self-doubt starts to

come in—some kind of "I can't do this, I'm no good," or "this is no good," whatever form it takes. Judgment. And all of a sudden, it's one big drag. We don't quite see how it got there, and it doesn't matter.

But it's interesting to notice, to look back at the motivation, because you can be putting out an enormous amount of effort and energy, but because the effort is tinged with wanting or expectation, we've fallen out of balance. And it leads into such tightness, striving, doubt, frustration—all of those.

So this quality of interest, this really heroic enthusiasm, in some way has to come in a balanced way from within ourselves. Once it's not there, if we don't recognize that and try to come back into balance, it's easy to practice very diligently but in a dead, dry sort of way—meeting the outer form, but the inner connection isn't there. And ultimately, you can't keep it up. It cracks somehow.

I'll give an example. A few years ago, I came here to do a two-month retreat with Sayadaw U Pandita, which does require an enormous amount of energy and effort. It's not like you can go into him and say, "Well, I felt a little tight, so I went out for a walk in the woods, and then I took a walk around the pond and read a little bit, had some tea, and I'm feeling much better." He doesn't cut a lot of slack, the way that he teaches.

Now, when I'm in a balanced space, as I said, a tremendous effort can be put out. And I know what that looks like because I've done it before. But at the beginning of this particular retreat, the day before the retreat began, I was flying here from somewhere, at an airport somewhere, and I spoke to my mother on the phone. She told me she had just been diagnosed with cancer and was going to have an operation—a double operation—in about a week. It was a shock. I didn't even know this was in the works. It really hit me.

So I said, "Well, I'm coming home." She said, "No, I don't want you to come. You can't come"—which was not like her. She said, "You have to go do your retreat. It's very important to you. You must go do your retreat." But she was so adamant that I felt, well, she really doesn't want me to come. So I came to do the retreat, which you can imagine I wasn't in the most wonderful space.

So I came and I just started. I would call her every day, and it became clear that the operation went well and things were fine. The call didn't feel like much of a disturbance—I'd call and go right back to the practice. So outer form, I was really matching it: sitting, walking, noting, not moving away from effort. I knew how to make it look right, even to myself.

But there was something so dry and dead. There wasn't the balance of interest and spontaneous connection. I was just trying to match a form. It took me three weeks to realize this. I felt like I was being slowly strangled somehow, until finally one day—I used to always walk in a hall on the second floor of the Catskills—I was walking up the stairs to my place, and this thought came into my mind. But you know those thoughts that you know are more than thoughts? You really believe this one, like the voice from the divine or something. Whatever this says, that's how it is. And this thought said, "If someone else is walking

in my place, I'm leaving the retreat."

And I thought, huh, I think I'd really do it too. And fortunately—or not—no one was walking there. But that really woke me up. I said, what is going on here? And it just actually woke me up to the fact that half of me wasn't here. Doing the form without that balance of interest, I could have done it for ten years and all I would do is get drier and drier.

So actually I did leave the retreat and go home, and it was the perfect thing to do. I stayed home for ten days and came back and really enjoyed it—just sank right in, because that sense of split wasn't there. I could be wholehearted.

It's not always such a dramatic thing, but sometimes we fall into ignoring a major issue that's going on and trying to just make our effort, our practice, meet an idea we have. But we can't be wholehearted because we're ignoring some major experience that's happening. So sometimes when you hit that real dryness, open up, pull back. What is going on? Because balanced effort—it's not about how it looks to yourself or anybody else. It's not about matching some ideal experience. It's about that quality of energy and interest that can just meet experience, moment to moment to moment.

Now, on the other side—and I'm going to keep going back and forth because there's never any one way—sometimes we push too hard. The effort becomes dull and dry out of expectation, or out of not seeing something major going on that we need to give attention to. But on the other side, that doesn't mean that at the first sign of something difficult or dry, we go, "Uh-oh, turning into dry, I better check out, I better open up, I better just give myself some kindness." It's not that either.

As we've said with aversion or with sleepiness—as Joseph mentioned the other night about sloth and torpor—the first effect of unpleasant experience or tiredness, low energy in the mind, is that the mind pulls away from what's going on. And if there's a lot of difficulty, it has the effect of withering the mind because it keeps pulling away. And if you just pound at it, pound at it, you do get exhausted. The energy does really drop. It falls down. We get fatigued.

It's said that energy is like a support—it's like it supports a house, holds it up. So when there's energy, you can be with something that's difficult in a fresh, balanced way. You notice, depending on your energy cycle, if you're fresh in the morning and you have a chronic ongoing pain that comes up throughout the day, in a fresh time you can really meet it, be with it, be interested. In a low energy time, it's almost impossible because the energy just isn't there to meet it freshly.

But rather than just give up, we can withdraw from what's difficult—and I don't mean give up, I just mean take the energy away from pounding at the difficult, that "I'm going to be with this sensation no matter what." Pull it away and freshen it. Which, as we've said often, means open up to sounds, open up to seeing if you're outside, take a walk. This is not giving up; it's deliberately doing things that can freshen and bring back some energy, and then meeting what is difficult or tiring. It really helps to have the mind bright,

clear, and alert.

But it is important to find that balance of when to keep meeting what's difficult without giving up and when to back off. At the first sign of difficulty to back off is really, as Joseph said, confusing sloth and torpor with compassion. Or another phrase from Trungpa that I love: idiot compassion. It's not really compassion. It's saying, "Yeah, it'll really be hard on me. I'm just so tired. If I keep practicing, it'll just make things harder for me. They say refresh, so I'll just take a five-hour nap and refresh." That's idiot compassion because it actually increases suffering. It doesn't help suffering ease, which is the point of compassion. So it's not necessarily kind to yourself.

Something I've discovered when I'm in this state of low energy, not real interest—but not when you're overwhelmed by something like terror or something really, really difficult to be with, just this sort of "eh, this is just too much, who wants to keep doing this, it's boring, it's not interesting"—

I'll just check out. That's the time to fall back on—not pushing, not unbalanced effort—but to fall back on continuity. I found it's actually much easier to be here 100% than it is to be here 80%. That might sound odd, but look and see.

When things aren't going the way I want, I don't try and change it, but I say, as we've said before, just sit, just walk. When I'm done with the walking, I just go sit. What happens in the sitting is absolutely out of my control. I'm not sitting and trying to get clear or trying to have things be a certain way. But just sit, and if I can, I come back when I space out.

When I get up from the sitting, if you're at 80%, you'll think, "Well, maybe I should have a cup of tea now because that would really kind of soothe me. Tea is so comforting." Or, "Maybe I should do something energetic, like do all my laundry. That would be a good thing to do." On and on, and the energy is just leaking out through the thinking and all the sense doors. "Maybe I'll read the bulletin board for the 450th time today. There just might be a note for me."

If I'm here 100%, I get up from the sitting and I think, "Oh, I'd like to—" but it doesn't matter what you'd like to, because you're going to walk out of this room and start walking and that's it. It actually saves a tremendous amount of energy to just do that instead of letting your mind and body run hither and thither. So you just sit, you just walk. When the walking's done, you just sit. And don't worry about what's happening. That's where all the suffering and strife is—worrying about what's happening. It's not actually in doing the sitting and the walking.

This has saved me in so many periods of boredom or frustration or low energy. I just die into the practice. Now you can see this is just the opposite of what I was telling you a minute ago, right? That's how it works with trying to balance energy or effort. You can't take one thing and say this is how to do it.

On the Sayadaw U Pandita retreat, it looked like that's what I was doing—dying into the practice, sit, walk, sit, walk. But actually I was ignoring something major. Other times, when there's nothing really major

going on and I just basically have low energy and would rather not put out any effort, when I just wish things were different—then I do die into the practice. Just sit, just walk, but don't try to be brilliant about it. Just let it happen. And you know what? The energy comes back by itself. The interest comes back.

That's where we can begin to see that energy is simply a factor of mind. It rises and falls. It's affected by conditions. This to me is where it gets really interesting instead of personal. It's affected by conditions.

Skillful means interventions can sometimes change conditions if we do it with a motivation that isn't out of wanting it to be a certain way. For instance, I know with sloth and torpor that the energy's low. If I aim very carefully at the breath or at sensations, if I make the noting quite precise, that takes effort and it brings up the energy. It's just a balanced activity. It's not that I do it because I hate sloth and torpor. If restlessness is there, I know there can be a lot of energy but not enough concentration. I can deliberately cultivate concentration by really coming back to the breath over and over and over without trying to notice too many things. The concentration gets stronger and comes up to balance with the energy, and again the restlessness can shift. That's just two examples. That comes from not identifying with energy, but simply seeing that conditions can change it.

One other aspect that I find very helpful: when it's past the point of skillful evaluation and energy just seems to have dropped out of the bottom and interest is gone, then again we're coming back to wise reflection, which can really be a helpful ally on the quality of spiritual urgency. In Pali, that's samvega. It's a particular quality. It comes from really recognizing the suffering aspects of all life, of our life—not with terror, but with an urge to understand, an urge to be free, or to help other beings, so that this becomes more urgent.

more important than avoidance or denial. Spiritual urgency is a very energizing state. It's not panic. It's not terror. It's not some frantic sense of "Oh my God, I better get out of this quick!" But it's very energizing, helping us meet whatever difficulty is arising.

There are a couple of reflections or contemplations that we can reach into our bag of tricks when energy has gotten really low and you can't generate interest in a balanced way and you don't want to push. One, of course, is appreciation of the preciousness of our current life. Being here on retreat is a rare opportunity, because each of us can consciously reflect on the preciousness of having this time in life, in any one life. The preciousness of having the time to deeply explore what is true, what is suffering, what is peace, what is freedom. That we not only have the time and the health to do it, but that each of us has the interest—which in some ways is the most rare of all.

I think often of being in Bodh Gaya, which as you know is the town where the Buddha was supposedly enlightened. The descendant of the tree under which he sat has a big temple stupa in the middle of a park, and it's a focal point for Buddhist pilgrims from all the Buddhist countries of the world. It's this dusty little village—well, it's not so little anymore, it's really grown—and you can see the interest and devotion that people bring. I also often reflect on the people who live there and run the chai shops, the tea shops, and

who do all the things to make money from the tourists, and who maybe have access, have opportunity to hear many teachings and just aren't interested. It's simply not important to them in this life. And here we've schlepped from halfway around the world to go and just sit under this tree. I actually got very inspired, which surprised me because I'm not so devotional, but it was very moving. And the people who live there could care less.

So just to reflect: even though I don't feel any energy, even though nothing's happening in my practice and nothing ever will, still there's this precious opportunity and I have the willingness and the interest to come and put myself here and to stay here. No mean feat. To really let yourself feel the gratitude, the appreciation for that. Not guilt—this is not a guilt trip. We're talking about real appreciation for our opportunities. Often that can bring up, again, energy and interest.

There's a little something I read from Colette, the French woman writer. She said, "What a wonderful life I've had. I only wish I'd realized it sooner." So this is our chance. This is sooner. It's now. What a wonderful life we have.

And then the other reflection—I'm going to condense the three into one—is basically our old friend and inspiration, the fact of suffering in all its aspects. Suffering is a tremendous motivator for urgency, for understanding. Again, not for panic. I'm not talking about panic. But it's what got the Bodhisattva before he became the Buddha. The story is that he lived this pristine life where all death and impermanence and sickness was hidden from him. And he left his palace grounds and went out, and it's called the Four Heavenly Messengers, where he ran into an old person, a sick person, a dead person. He was so shocked, asking his charioteer, "Well, what's that? Does it happen to everybody? Will it happen to me?" Just seeing that suffering, he couldn't rest anymore in a life of pleasure. It woke him up to compassion for the situation of all of us, including him, and to wanting to find the freedom from that pain and confusion. The fourth messenger being a renunciate, which represents a path to understanding.

These messengers are available to us at all times in our lives. I personally find it an enormously helpful and inspiring way to relate to suffering, whether it's your knee pain here, or your frustration, or your boredom, or whether it's in the bigger picture, watching someone else. You can feel when someone here might be suffering. You can see it. Or just looking at nature.

Or I often have to go to a hospital in Worcester to see my doctor, a big teaching hospital. And in some way I love going there. Now this might sound strange, but I love going there because it wakes me up. I just go there and make it a point to really look around, to see people from all walks of life—from young children to the very old, people who don't speak English, with all kinds of suffering and all kinds of responses to that suffering. You can see confusion and terror, or a real spark of light, or someone who's kind to someone else and how much it lights them up. I always come back from being at the hospital feeling much more connected and attuned, and also more resolute in my willingness to meet whatever's arising in my experience—using the experience of suffering in whatever aspect as a wake-up call rather than as

something fearful or as something to try to hide from. It helps us see what's really important.

This is a little bit from a man who has a degenerative lung disease. This is my second lung disease story, I didn't realize that. To me, this is really about urgency and seeing what's important:

"Walking anywhere with friends, especially uphill, is an occasion for silence. I cannot walk, talk, and breathe at the same time. Every gram of oxygen must be used for locomotion. There is nothing left over. Superfluity must go. Whatever is extra must go.

This becomes an amazing metaphor. In my life, in my mind, what is superfluous? What is extra? Anger that freezes into resentment, jealousy, greed, gossip, ego clinging, pretense, embarrassment, any form of fixation, running after pleasure, the discursive thought that maintains the storyline of me. These things are very costly in terms of the life energy that it takes to keep them going. They are what conversation is mostly about. I cannot take in enough oxygen to support them anymore, except by holding completely still and doing nothing else.

When the oxygen is diminished below a certain point, you must choose absolutely between feeding all your mental bloodsuckers and taking care of your true business. You cannot afford to keep them around as pets. What an opening, what a discovery follows from that simple realization. Could I ever afford it? Can anyone? What made me think that I could not let go of this expensive baggage before now?"

That's not spoken with a quality of aversion. That's just with the quality of spiritual urgency. What's really important? Is freedom important enough that I can bring my attention—feeling for him the suffering of his lungs, for us whatever happens to be arising? That's all.

And the urgency brings us a resoluteness that we sometimes can lose touch with otherwise. As one of my teachers said, comparing urgency to your house being on fire—which the Buddha also used as a metaphor often—when your house is on fire and someone comes to tell you, you immediately start home. And if you meet an old friend who says, "Hey, let's go have a cappuccino, let's sit and talk for a while," you don't have to stop and ponder, "Well, should I have the coffee, should I go home?" No, we go home. That's the quality of energy that urgency can bring up in us. It just clarifies what really matters.

And so we can use reflection to reconnect with that space, both from gratitude and from suffering as a wake-up call. In some ways we're all here as the fourth messenger—all have, in a way, answered the call of the renunciate to be here for three months, to clear away the complexities of life so we can really explore. In some ways we've each, for now, made that clear decision about what is really important. It's not that you don't each already know for yourselves. So the urgency isn't stirring up something new. It's just a way to help us reconnect with what we already know, at times when we're getting a little lost or a little low in energy.

And of course, it can always flip to the other side. I could just go on forever—this side and this side, this side and this side. Urgency, again, can drift out of balance and backfire. As urgency inspires interest,

inspires commitment, inspires effort, an opening to suffering, gratitude—again, it can get to be a little out of balance, both ways. Leaving the comfort zone with urgency waking us up, or opening more to suffering, or really seeing what's so—sometimes the energy and the mindfulness isn't quite as strong as the amount of difficulty that comes in, as we all well know. And sometimes, rather than just being able to resolutely meet what's happening, it's as if we're washed over, overwhelmed.

The suffering just becomes so great that it's as if we're getting sucked into a black hole, just getting lost and spinning. And it's not a matter of "oh, let me just meet this mindfully." It's a matter of simply not drowning anymore.

At that point, what is really skillful before we completely wither is to back off out of skillful means. But in this state of feeling overwhelmed by suffering, it's very hard for most people to trust that backing off is what is skillful. Because usually what most people I know or talk to tend to do is to think, "This is hard, so I must try harder. I must really sit with this. I must really meet this." And so we push and push, and again we start moving into trying to change things. We get grimmer and grimmer, and we think, "Well, if I try harder, then I'll really be with it."

But grimness is not equal to balanced effort. The more grim you are does not mean you're doing better practice. It means, all it means, is that you're grim. That's really all it means.

So when we're getting into that space of "it's too much pain, so push, push, push," the absolutely skillful thing to do is to back off, open up, bring in what Thich Nhat Hanh calls seeds of joy. He talks about being in Vietnam during the war, working with the social workers, and they're so busy and there's so much death and pain around them and they're so busy working with it. He would say, "I have to remind them to open up, to smell the beautiful smells of the herbs at night, to smell the flowers, to really appreciate the beauty of nature here in Vietnam."

And you can see, we can get so involved in suffering it seems—what do you mean, smell the nice smells of the coriander? People are dying! But it's very important. We need to back off to refresh the heart and mind, which in itself brings back energy.

So bringing in seeds of joy. I don't mean immediately go into some erotic fantasy, but more open your attention to seeds of joy that are present here and now. Smell the mint, as Thich Nhat Hanh says. When we are endlessly exhorting you to open up to sound, that's the way to bring in spaciousness.

I used to, in really hard times in retreat, when I would never go outside because I was just so slow, it was too much trouble—I would just go open the door of the fire escape, my little walkway there in the Catskills, and stand on the fire escape and just be with that big tree that's right outside there for a few minutes. That's all. I'd just be with the tree. I'd quit trying to be mindful or know. Just, ahh. The tree and the sky would bring in a spaciousness, a happiness. It was wonderful. And that was usually all I needed—just enough to balance the grimness, the heaviness, the trying. And with that spaciousness, I

could go back to my walking or sitting and just meet whatever was happening.

Sometimes we need a little bit more than being with a tree for a few minutes. Sometimes you really need to go outside. You might need not to sit or walk, but just take a walk. But it's coming from skillful means, not from aversion or "I've had it."

And the catch is this: when you're in this state where you really need the skillful means of backing off, what usually is also happening is strong self-judgment. "I'm not good enough. I'm not doing this right. I'm not trying hard enough." And when self-judgment is happening and we don't see it, you'll never believe that it's skillful to back off because self-judgment is right there to say, "Uh-uh, you're not trying hard enough. You're lazy. You're not doing it right. What did they say about do it 100%? Go, go, try!" You're back in the football game.

Whenever your mind says, in that tone of voice, "You're not trying hard enough," it almost always means back off. But we just don't trust it. So I've learned over the years how to recognize the presence of self-judgment. That's a big step—just recognize its presence and then realize that all your evaluations at that moment are filtered through the lens of self-judgment, and you can't believe them.

So when you feel tight and grim and dour, and you're pushing, pushing, pushing, and you think, "I need to push harder"—just pause. Think, "Oh, maybe I'm actually pushing too hard." And try to open up and back off.

That's how we discover balance: by falling out of it. The worst that can happen is you back off and the energy drops a little bit. So what? Probably what will actually happen is you back off, everything becomes more spacious, and the energy comes up again. The interest comes up. We reconnect with the inner spring of interest and contentment.

Another trick: when you feel that voice saying "push, push, try harder," and you're wondering whether to back off, see if you can notice the intention behind the need to try harder. Is the intention just to meet what's happening? Or are you trying harder out of fear that you're going to lose it? Or trying harder in an attempt to make something happen? Or out of some kind of self-blame—"I have to try harder because I'm so useless"?

All of those are good signs as well. Self-judgment is coloring your evaluation. Back off.

So this is our constant, ongoing challenge in working with balancing energy: how not to get lost in pushing, in expectation, in dry striving; how to bring in spaciousness and nourish our heart; and at the same time, never give up, never abandon energy either.

Something that actually inspires me—I read in the Dalai Lama's autobiography that even now, the Dalai Lama, you'd think he could take it easy. He gets up early and does formal practice of four to five hours a day. I thought, "Wow."

Now, if you're in self-judgment, that will only make you feel worse, so forget I said it. But if you can use it as inspiration—"Oh, there's no way it's ever going to be perfect"—then let go of that and just play with this ongoing balance. Every time we tip out of balance, it's just another way to learn. It's not a big mistake.

This is our ongoing challenge.

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