Wise and Balanced Effort

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2010) · 1:02:31

The other night, Annie talked about letting go as being the whole of the path. And the Buddha, in fact, said that all phenomena are unworthy of attachment. Or another translation: nothing is worth clinging to.

Why is that? Why is nothing worth clinging to?

Well, with clinging, when we cling to something, we are essentially trying to hold it in place, trying to stem the tide of ever-changing experience, ever-changing phenomenon. Even if for just a moment, we're trying to hold something into place, and things change. So when we cling, we suffer.

But it's not so easy to simply let go. Letting go sounds like such a lovely thing. Oh yes, just let go. But how easy is that to do?

Our strong habits and patterns of holding onto things, trying to manipulate, to change, to fix, to control the world—these patterns have from time to time given us a sense of control, given us a sense of security, and have given us a sense of what feels like some kind of satisfaction. And so they're very deeply ingrained patterns, these patterns of holding on, the ways that we try to find happiness. We are fighting against, in a way, or struggling against very strong ingrained tendencies—maybe not ingrained but practiced, very practiced tendencies to hold on.

So it takes quite a bit of effort to learn to let go. Letting go sounds like something that should be easy, but no. We need to train our minds so that we can let go of clinging. A key aspect of this training is wise and balanced effort. We need effort, courage, energy to walk this path of letting go.

This is what I'd like to talk about this evening: effort and energy. These are two very closely related qualities of our practice.

I'd like to start by talking about energy. The Pali term for energy is virya, usually translated as energy. This energy itself is a neutral quality of mind; it takes on the flavor of however we are directing that energy. So this energy can be directed towards unwholesome states of mind, such as resentment, anger, frustration, pride, desire for power or money. Or it can be directed towards wholesome states such as generosity, kindness, happiness, concentration. The flavor of the energy comes with how we are using that energy. So it's really important in our practice to understand and know how to direct that energy.

The quality of energy appears in quite a number of the Buddha's teachings. I'm sure that many of you are aware that the Buddha was a great list maker. The quality of energy is actually in more lists than any other quality of mind, I think. It may be equal to the number of lists that mindfulness is in, but I actually

think that energy is in more lists than mindfulness. So it's a really important quality to cultivate and understand.

In one of those lists—the list of wholesome qualities to cultivate on the path to awakening called the paramis, or the ten perfections—the quality of energy follows the quality of wisdom. In one way of understanding that list, it is a kind of sequential progression, where each quality supports the cultivation of the next and helps perfect the next quality. And so it's a really interesting teaching, I think, that energy follows wisdom in that list.

So what is wisdom? There are actually several definitions of wisdom in the Buddha's teachings, and I'm going to offer a couple as a frame for how I'll talk about energy and effort in this talk.

One of the definitions of wisdom is a very simple understanding of what qualities of mind support our movement away from suffering and towards freedom. A very simple understanding of what is skillful with respect to moving away from suffering, and understanding also what is unskillful, what qualities move us towards suffering. That is one of the definitions of wisdom: to understand that. Essentially, we want to cultivate those qualities that move us away from suffering. So it's important to understand that energy as a quality, as a spiritual faculty on the path, is energy directed towards cultivating wholesome qualities—energy directed towards letting go of unwholesome qualities.

Another definition of wisdom is the understanding of the Four Noble Truths. And this is very similar in a way to the definition around understanding what's wholesome and unwholesome, what's skillful and unskillful. The Four Noble Truths: understand suffering; let go of the cause of suffering; realize the release from suffering; and cultivate those qualities of heart and mind that lead to the ending of suffering. So the definition of wisdom is very connected with understanding what leads us away from suffering.

This was precisely the problem the Buddha was trying to solve: How can we be free from this dukkha, this suffering, this dissatisfaction, this endless sense of wanting things to be other than they are, wanting to hold onto things, wanting to fix, to change, to manipulate?

So the energy of our practice, the spiritual faculty of energy, is energy directed towards the purpose of awakening. It is the fuel of our practice. There's one text, I believe it's the Treatise on the Paramis, in which the author says that it is entirely through the spiritual faculty of energy that all the requisites for enlightenment succeed.

We need energy. We need this skillful energy that is imbued with wisdom to lead us away from suffering, away from this dukkha, this dissatisfaction with our experience, our lives.

This understanding of energy, this understanding of the spiritual faculty of energy being directed towards freedom from suffering, brings me to another translation for this term virya, which is courage. I looked up tonight as I was preparing this talk what the English definition of courage is. I typically think of it in terms of bravery, but I came up with two aspects from two different dictionaries and put them together into one

definition that I really feel captures the sense of this quality of virya, of the spiritual faculty of energy: courage is the inner strength of heart to venture, persevere, and withstand danger, fear, or difficulty.

The inner strength of heart to persevere in the face of difficulty—that's what we do here. A lot of the time, that's what we're doing: meeting our suffering, not running from it, not turning away, not rejecting it, but meeting it with that inner strength of heart.

Energy and effort are very closely connected. Effort might be thought of as the application of energy. The spiritual faculty of energy is described as being the factor behind right effort—this energy directed towards moving away from suffering, towards cultivating the wholesome, letting go of the unwholesome. That energy is the factor behind effort, and so we use energy to make effort.

There's an interesting two-way link between these two, because not only do we use energy to make effort, but making effort creates energy. In fact, the suttas describe this. The Buddha says, "What is the faculty of energy? The energy that one obtains on the basis of the four right efforts. This is called the faculty of energy."

This can be a little counterintuitive. We usually understand the notion of using energy to make effort, and we think about energy getting used up as we make effort. Sometimes that's the way it feels. There's precedent for that in terms of our physical energy—we use energy to make the effort to go for a run, for instance, and we can only go for so long. Then that energy runs out and we need to stop and rest. We carry that model into our practice and think we need to accumulate some energy, then we use that energy up, and then we have to rest and stop practicing for a while because we're too tired to practice.

This teaching turns that on its head. It says that actually, if you make effort, if you make wise effort, it creates energy. Part of the way I understand this is that there's an awful lot of energy bound up in clinging. When we direct our energy towards the letting go of that clinging, it frees up a whole lot of energy. So there's this connection between energy and effort: making effort cultivates energy.

I'd like to talk about the Buddha's teaching on wise effort. Many of you are probably familiar with this teaching. The teaching on wise effort also takes as its foundation this aspect of wisdom—the understanding of what is skillful and unskillful with respect to suffering.

The simplest definition I know of skillful or wholesome qualities of mind are those qualities that are based in non-greed, non-aversion, and non-delusion. Those qualities of mind that are not based in greed, aversion, and delusion are wholesome qualities of mind—states like compassion, kindness, joy, tranquility, and peace. Unwholesome qualities of mind are those states based in greed, aversion, and delusion—states like anger, frustration, pride, boredom, restlessness, desire, and despair. These are the states of mind that lead us into dukkha, into suffering.

The teaching on right effort uses this understanding as a foundation. The Buddha talks about four kinds of right effort: the effort to avoid unwholesome states that have not yet arisen, the effort to abandon

unwholesome states that have arisen, the effort to arouse or cultivate wholesome states that have not yet arisen, and the effort to maintain wholesome states that have arisen.

Now, if you're unfamiliar with this teaching, it probably sounds a little confusing or complicated. So I'm going to go through each one of these and talk at some length about each.

The first is the effort to avoid unwholesome states that have not arisen. This is basically about understanding, learning through the process of observing our experience with mindfulness. We cannot look at this quality of wise effort without also including mindfulness. As we observe our experience with mindfulness, we start to see that certain causes and conditions lead us into suffering, into distress. As we begin to understand this, we can learn to avoid the suffering by avoiding the causes.

This is an interesting teaching, and we have to be really careful in applying it. Because at first glance, it might sound like a kind of aversion—avoiding things that will lead us to suffering is a kind of aversion. So we need to be really careful that this avoidance isn't coming out of aversion, isn't coming out of the desire to get rid of something or out of a fear of that suffering. The word "avoiding" can have some subtle meanings.

For example, if you notice that you find yourself judging and comparing when you're standing in line for the meal—which I think happens quite a lot—looking at how much other people might be taking, what they're taking, all of the kinds of judgments that arise in proximity with other people. You notice that this judging mind comes up while you're standing in line in the dining hall.

At first glance, you might think this teaching would suggest something like, "Well, if standing in line is causing that judging, maybe I should wait until everybody else has gone through so I don't have to watch what other people are doing." That is one way to avoid that kind of judgment. But that might be motivated out of a sense of aversion, a kind of feeling of aversion toward that judging mind.

Another way to engage with this would be to get interested in understanding not just the simple causes and conditions of that judgment arising—the fact of standing in line—but something deeper about how it comes to be in your own mind. Perhaps you see somebody taking a very large serving of something and have a moment of fear: "There's not going to be enough for me." And then the judgment follows: "They're taking too much food." So noticing that fear, noticing the underlying causes, observing very carefully what they are, we begin to understand them. And as we begin to understand the causes, the meaning of avoiding changes for us.

Perhaps the meaning of avoiding while standing in that line is not simply about what happens to us, but about what we do with what happens. We see somebody taking some food, and then we notice that we start thinking about it. The initial act of seeing somebody taking food isn't where the judging comes from—the judging comes out of the thinking, out of the belief that there might not be enough, out of the proliferation of thoughts. If you can be mindful of the seeing and simply know that you're seeing, that

proliferation of thoughts might not arise, which would avoid the arising of judgment.

This is a teaching on sense restraint. Often we think of sense restraint as blocking our senses off—not looking, not hearing, putting earplugs in, or just looking down at the ground two feet in front of us to avoid seeing people. Another way to engage with sense restraint is to restrain the senses through mindfulness, through knowing: seeing, knowing; hearing, knowing. It's restraint in that you know seeing is happening, and in that knowing there is less opportunity for the mind, in its habitual way, to leap out of that situation and start to think, start to proliferate, judge, become frustrated, angry, or hopeless. Using mindfulness, we can avoid unwholesome states that have not arisen.

The second kind of right effort is the effort to abandon unwholesome states that have arisen. This means that we notice when we're caught up in some difficult, unwholesome mind state, and we make the effort to let go of it.

This letting go can have an active quality where you recognize, "Wow, this state of mind—this anger or despair or loneliness—isn't very helpful. Maybe I can let go of it." We see the unskillfulness of that state and begin to release it in an active way. Sometimes, even through the simple recognition—"Oh yeah, this is happening again. I don't need to do this"—it can fall away.

Often, though, it's not quite that simple. There are some techniques we can use to support an active letting go of difficult states of mind. One technique the Buddha taught is replacing the thoughts that surround a difficult state with more wholesome thoughts. If you're angry at someone, for example, or finding a lot of judgment arising, there are thoughts that accompany that state: "They shouldn't be doing that." If you can recognize those thoughts and replace them with thoughts of metta—"May you be happy, may you be at ease"—this active replacement is a way of abandoning, of letting go of that anger. It can lead us out of anger. Again, this can't be done out of aversion to the anger.

Another way to let go is to redirect our attention. Sometimes when there's a difficult state happening, like loneliness, if it's strong and you find it difficult to be mindful of it, if it feels overwhelming, it can be helpful to set it aside. Not with aversion, not with the sense that this is unacceptable, but with a sense of compassion—

I see that this difficult state of mind is overwhelming my mindfulness. So I'm going to turn my attention to something else right now and let that be in the background. This is a way that supports our letting go of difficult states that are sometimes overwhelming for us. This is what I call the "not now" mode of ignoring our experiences.

I had a time in my practice where I found that anger was particularly overwhelming for me—an anger at a particular person. And when I tried to bring mindfulness to that anger, I found myself just spiraling down into the pattern of anger over and over again. I began to realize it wasn't the time to try to be mindful of it, that my mindfulness wasn't strong enough to meet that anger.

So I began to realize that, and not out of aversion but really out of compassion for myself, I would recognize: there's the anger, I see you, this is not the time. Not now. I actually kind of made a bargain with it. I said, I'll pay attention to you when my mindfulness gets stronger. Kind of meeting it and saying, I see you, I see you're asking for attention, but this is not the time. Not now. That's a way of letting go. It's a letting be, but not a letting be with the experience right in the field of our attention. It's a letting be in the background, just letting it be.

This letting go of the second kind of right effort can also be a turning of our attention to experience with mindfulness. Mindfulness itself helps to disengage us from the way we're stuck to these difficulties. I kind of think of it like this: when we're engaged in spinning in some kind of difficult state, it's like the gears are engaged, and they just keep each other going, fueling the cycle. When we bring mindfulness into the picture, if we can be mindful of the difficult states, it's like disengaging the gears. It doesn't stop the gear from spinning, but it's no longer adding to that momentum. And so what mindfulness does is allow that state to wind down on its own in a very natural way, through simply meeting it with this nonjudgmental, nonreactive mindfulness that Rebecca talked about so beautifully last night.

Meeting with mindfulness these difficult states, using this energy, this courage, the inner strength of heart to meet difficulty—this is actually a movement towards the abandoning of that unwholesome state of mind. Because we're no longer fueling it, we're no longer encouraging it, and it will settle out in time. This is a true letting be of the experience. This is much of our practice.

This aspect of wise effort is a lot of where our practice lies. We see difficulty come up. I remember sitting in this very hall, suffering with so much pain and distress, and seeing that the mind was doing it, that it was clinging in the mind. And I remember saying to myself, I'd let go if I knew how to. Sometimes we don't know how to let go. But we can be mindful of that experience, and it will let go. This is much of where we practice.

So fortunately, in his teaching on wise effort, the Buddha didn't just say it's all about having to look at suffering, abandoning suffering, avoiding suffering. He also talked about the beautiful states of mind—an equal partner to this practice. The third kind of right effort is the effort to arouse wholesome states that have not arisen. This is a practice of cultivating those states that we know are skillful with respect to leading us away from suffering: cultivating states of kindness, of compassion, of patience, of concentration.

To cultivate wholesome mind states that are not present, we need to first abstain from those states that oppose those wholesome states—and I think this is why the Buddha puts the first two right efforts first. So if we're trying to cultivate kindness, we need to abstain from anger, from hostility. And we need to learn how to put ourselves in situations that will cultivate the conditions for that state, cultivating those qualities of mind.

Abstaining from situations and qualities of mind that oppose wholesome states of mind—the precepts, the

ethical component of our practice—is a big part of this. If we think about the precepts as just being avoiding, avoiding killing, avoiding stealing, avoiding lying, it can give us some sense of joy to be engaged in that way, knowing that we're not harming. And each of those precepts also supports the cultivation of a wholesome state of mind. Refraining from killing cultivates compassion. So we can recognize and appreciate the precepts from that perspective as well.

Refraining from lying cultivates honesty and truthfulness. Refraining from stealing cultivates contentment. So when we engage with these practices of avoiding and abstaining from unwholesome states, we can also recognize that they're supporting the growth of these beautiful qualities of mind. Recognizing that helps to nurture those qualities. It's like planting seeds—to recognize, yes, this is cultivating compassion, is like planting a seed of compassion.

We can also cultivate these wholesome qualities through active practices. The practice of metta is one of these—the practice of actively directing your attention towards cultivating thoughts of goodwill. This is an aspect of this part of right effort: cultivating wholesome states that have not yet arisen. We also cultivate mindfulness. My Burmese teacher Sayadaw U Pandita has said that mindfulness is the most wholesome mind state. And so the act of bringing mindfulness to our experience is cultivating mindfulness. As Rebecca said last night, each moment of mindfulness cultivates future moments of mindfulness. By being mindful now, you are creating the conditions for mindfulness to arise in the future where it may not have come up if you had not been mindful. So this is also a big part of our practice of right effort—cultivating mindfulness, cultivating the wholesome quality of concentration.

The fourth kind of right effort is the effort to sustain wholesome states that have arisen. When I first heard this teaching, I thought, why would you need a teaching about that? Wouldn't this be natural? Why would you have to try to sustain wholesome states that have arisen? Well, when I started looking at my mind, I realized that I actually did have to work at this.

I found myself sitting at one point in my first three-month retreat, finally getting to a place of calm. The mind was settled, it was quiet, and the first thing I did with that was, "Oh, calm—that's nice. This is a perfect time to pay attention to that pain in my back." So rather than resting with the calm, I agitated the mind by trying to use it, to do something with it. I began to understand that it actually does take some inclination and effort towards sustaining wholesome states that have arisen.

Another time I found myself feeling joy arising, and it was getting very strong. There was a sense of it being almost overwhelming—like, "Whoa, I can't handle this"—and there was a kind of movement to try to push it down. This is the opposite of cultivating that wholesome quality of joy. Fortunately, a little bit of wisdom passed through my mind, and it said, "Don't worry, it'll pass." With that, the mind let go and the joy got really intense. But then it crested and moved into a place of just peaceful happiness.

Allowing these wholesome states, being mindful of them, is actually one of the most powerful ways to cultivate them. Mindfulness is an interesting quality. It has the power, when we pay attention to

unwholesome states, to make them less likely to occur in the future. And when we pay attention to wholesome states, it makes them more likely to occur in the future. It's as if the unwholesome states shrink in the brightness and clarity of the light of mindfulness, while the wholesome states bask in its warmth and light. Mindfulness is a very powerful tool in this practice of right effort. So be mindful. Appreciate these wholesome states when they have arisen. That actually supports maintaining them, supports their cultivation.

It's also really helpful to recognize the beautiful qualities of mind that come from the practice. Sometimes as we are practicing, we're in the midst of attending to some experience—a pain in the knee, or a feeling of loneliness, or frustration—and we're not really recognizing that along with that attentiveness of mindfulness is coming perhaps some confidence that we can engage, some concentration through the ability to sustain attention, some interest in exploring our experience. All of these are wholesome, beautiful qualities of mind that almost come along for the ride as we pay attention to our experience. Recognize these beautiful qualities. It will support their cultivation.

So we can look at right effort in another way. We've talked about these as being four different things, but they can actually also be seen as four sides of a single process in our minds.

So for example, if you are cultivating mindfulness with the object of your attention being anger, you're paying attention to anger with mindfulness. This supports the letting go of that unskillful quality of anger—that letting go being the second kind of right effort. It helps prevent the arising of further reactivity to that anger. If you're mindful of the anger, it's helping to keep it from spiraling out of control. This is avoiding unwholesome states that have not yet arisen. It is also cultivating and supporting the mindfulness, the concentration, the equanimity. Many beautiful qualities are both cultivated and maintained as we bring mindfulness to this practice. So being mindful encompasses all four right efforts in the very act of mindfulness.

The other aspect of the Buddha's teaching on effort is that it needs to be balanced. Energy and effort both need to be balanced. When there's too much energy in the system, there tends to be restlessness. When there's too little, there tends to be dullness, sleepiness. So we need to monitor our energy, know when we have too much, when we have too little, and find ways to balance it. This energy will change from day to day, even from hour to hour or minute to minute. So it's a continual kind of tracking in a way. It doesn't have to be an intense kind of project, but we need to have a sense of where our energy level is.

In one teaching, the Buddha compared the quality of energy needed for the practice to the tuning of a musical instrument. If you're tuning a stringed instrument and the strings are tightened too tight, they'll break, they'll snap, and it won't be able to make music. If you're tuning that instrument and the strings are too loose, there won't be enough tension in the string for it to make a beautiful sound. In a similar way, our energy needs to be neither too tight nor too loose.

Another teaching along this way that I love, that for me has been a beautiful metaphor and an inspiring

thought to help me when I'm either pushing too hard or falling behind—this was a teaching where somebody asked the Buddha, "How did you cross the flood?" The flood being the flood of greed, aversion, and delusion, the flood of suffering. And the Buddha responded, "Without tarrying, friend, and without hurrying, did I cross the flood." The person responded, "But how did you, without tarrying, without hurrying, cross the flood?" The Buddha said, "When I tarried, I sank. When I hurried, I was swept away. And so without tarrying, without hurrying, I crossed the flood."

To me, this is a great metaphor for just meeting this moment. So often we are tumbling ahead, trying to be mindful of future moments before they've come. That's hurrying, pushing too hard. Or we're sleepy, we're dull, we're not connecting. That's when we sink. I had this image almost of just walking on water. And without tarrying, without hurrying, just at the right pace, just this step, just this step—that is the pace that allows for that balance of energy.

So one way to balance the energy is through balancing our effort, because of that connection between effort and energy. Effort makes energy. A balanced effort supports a balanced energy. This is really what you might call the art of meditation—learning how to navigate moment by moment, to meet each moment, to just meet each moment, to not push too hard into it and to not disconnect from it, but just to meet it.

In a moment, it's not too hard to be mindful right now. Can you feel the sensations of your buttocks on the cushion or chair or bench? Can you feel the sensations of your hands? Can you feel your lips touching? How hard is that to do as I mention each thing? Usually it's not too hard. It's not very hard to be mindful for a moment. What's difficult is to sustain it over time. That's where we lose that balance of effort. We push, trying to gather up moments and be mindful of multiple moments at a time. At least that's the way I see my mind working.

I'm going to be mindful of this whole sitting. But it doesn't work that way. You can only be mindful of a split second. That's it. That's all the effort that is needed. Enough effort to be mindful of this moment, and then do it again, and do it again, and do it again—over and over.

That "over and over" part seems overwhelming if we think about it. But if we just do it, it's not overwhelming. It's just this moment. It's just meeting this moment. And it's not very hard to meet this moment. So it's best not to think about trying to sustain effort and mindfulness over a long period of time.

Another of my teachers, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, compares the practice of mindfulness to lifting weights. We start with the light weights, the ones we can handle. If we start by trying to pick up fifty or a hundred pound weights, we're not going to be able to do it very easily, and we'll strain ourselves. But we start with one pound weights—that's not so hard. We work with one pound weights for a while, then we can pick up two pound weights, then five pound weights.

With mindfulness and effort, we start by just being mindful for a moment. Mindful for half a breath, and

then another half a breath, and then another half a breath. Just enough energy to make it through half a breath. How hard is that? And then do it again.

This is really a powerful way to practice—letting go of the idea of the future and just meeting now. That's all there is anyway, is now. The future is an idea in our minds. So we're just meeting this moment.

We can apply this in walking practice as well. I've found that sometimes when my mind is very scattered during walking practice, if I pick a spot—say, two steps out on the ground—and think, "Okay, that little spot, that grain in the wood, maybe I can be mindful to that place," I'd take those two steps and I could be mindful for two steps. Then I'd pick another spot and do it again. It felt like pulling myself along, just gently pulling myself along. The mind could stay present for a very short time. If I tried to force my mind to be present for an entire length of the path, I would invariably lose it. But if I just tried to be present for a step and then again, that helped with the continuity of mindfulness.

With this kind of practice, we need to learn how to monitor ourselves, to learn just how frequently we need to make that reminder. Essentially, what I'm talking about here is reminding yourself: pay attention, just be aware. Can I be mindful for a moment, and another moment, and another moment?

At some point, the mindfulness begins to gain momentum. And if you're continuing to remind yourself, it's going to get in the way. There's an analogy I like to use about this momentum that builds. It's like riding on a scooter—you know, those scooters that kids ride on. You start on the scooter and you have to tap your foot on the ground frequently in order to get that momentum going. But after tapping for a while, you can ride for quite a ways without having to tap so frequently. It needs less effort to move because the momentum has built up. As you're riding that scooter, you begin to get a sense of when it's wobbling, when you need to tap again.

It's like that with our mindfulness practice. As the momentum builds, you begin to get a sense of how frequently you need to remind yourself, how frequently you need to engage with that efforting.

Sometimes as the mindfulness begins to gain momentum, my own pattern—a habit of strong effort, of over-efforting—would arise. So I began to ask myself: How little energy, how little effort do I need in order to be present right now? This was a great counter to that over-striving pattern. The counter to the opposite tendency—the tendency to just lay back and be lax—is reminding yourself: Can I be mindful for this next breath? Mindful again.

So we ask: How little effort do I need in order to be mindful in this moment? Backing off, backing off. And at some point, the mind will wander.

Then you know you need to bring the effort back in.

Another aspect of this balanced effort that has been very helpful in my own practice is remembering that there are times of the day when energy naturally gets lower. We all go through cycles of energy. Practice

isn't so much about trying to push when that low energy is present, but rather making the best effort you can given the available energy. It may not feel like the mind is very clear. It may feel like the mind wanders a lot. But you're making the best effort you can—just keeping on trying to be present, reminding yourself to be aware, reminding yourself to be mindful as best you can given the circumstances.

As energy levels naturally shift and change, if you have been making that effort, the practice will naturally come together again. If you let go of trying to make effort in those places where energy is low, you'll have to work harder as the energy cycles through the day. So just make the best effort you can given the circumstances. There's no need to berate yourself for not having a strong level of energy all the time. None of us do. We all go through these cycles. So we need this patience. Patience.

A key piece around making effort is realizing that what we're doing is cultivating the conditions for freedom. We have to use energy skillfully to cultivate those conditions. We cannot make freedom happen. We cannot make insight happen. We can't make concentration happen. We can use energy and mindfulness to cultivate the conditions—and then let go. The results are out of your hands.

One way to look at this is through an analogy of ripening fruit. One teacher said that her teacher told her: when the fruit is ripe, it will fall from the tree. We can create conditions for supporting a tree's growth—giving it light, water, nourishment—but we cannot make that fruit ripen. That belongs to a different process, a natural process of nature. But we can support the conditions for that fruit to ripen. And that's how our practice works. We make the effort to support the conditions, cultivating the wholesome and letting go of the unwholesome. And then we let go. The results naturally occur in their own time.

I'll finish with a quote from Piyadasi Thera, the great Sri Lankan scholar-monk and practitioner:

"We must, by our own resolute efforts, rise up and make our way to the portals of liberty. And it is always, in every moment, in our power to do so. Neither are those portals locked, with the key in possession of someone else from whom it must be obtained by prayer or entreaty. That door is free of all bolts and bars, save those that we ourselves have made."

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