Wise Effort

Will Kabat-Zinn · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2010) · 55:49

Good evening.

My name is Will Kabat-Zinn, and I'll be here with you assisting for the rest of the retreat. I just arrived today. It's a little strange coming into the middle of a retreat and not having met any of you and not knowing where you're at exactly. But I thought it would be a good idea to sit up here tonight and speak with you a little and get a feel for what's happening. And you can get a little feel for me too. I look forward to getting to know many of you over these next weeks.

I thought I'd speak a little bit about effort. I was asked to speak about effort—not that there's any sense that you need to make more of it. Usually it's the opposite. But effort is one of those themes that keeps coming back, really, in everything we do. It's always a relevant topic, and especially in meditation, because meditation is an unusual kind of activity and requires a different kind of effort than many of us are used to making.

As a culture, as a society, we tend to be really good effort makers. We're good at doing. We're big doers. We like to get things done. But in that kind of doing, we can miss something that's very close to us. If we're making that kind of big doing effort in meditation, we can miss what's most fundamental.

Even the idea of cultivating awareness can be misleading, because awareness is here all the time. And it operates effortlessly. This is true in terms of your hearing my voice right now. You don't have to do a lot for that to happen. It's kind of amazing, actually. You don't know what I'm going to say, but you end up hearing what I'm actually saying. You don't have to do any anticipating.

This is true with seeing as well. You're seeing very clearly, or relatively clearly, depending on vision—which is different than awareness; that's just the organ. But without making a huge amount of effort, there's some sense of seeing if you have sight. If you don't, you can use any other sense—feeling. It doesn't require a lot of effort to be aware of the room. That's something awareness kind of just does for you. And when something changes in it, you're just aware of it. You didn't know I was going to do that, but you can see it.

So that's a relief, because you don't have to know everything in advance. The awareness takes care of the knowing part of it for you.

This is true with sensation, feeling in the body too. You have this capacity for feeling, and if you tap on your knee, you can feel it without trying too hard. I always think this is important to point out as a reminder. Even though you've all been practicing for quite a while, it's always a helpful reminder for

me—just that, oh wow, it's closer and more immediate than I can sometimes think. This amazing mind, this amazing capacity that is happening for all of us all the time. This knowingness which just goes on and on.

And we can't stop it. That part always gets me. You can't turn it off. You can't stop being aware. You can stop being aware of one particular thing and shift the attention. But there's always some awareness happening, even when you're not aware of it. This is true in dreaming, actually. It's a good example of this.

You wake up and remember your dream. You might think, "I wasn't aware because I was dreaming," but somebody remembers the dream. So there was some awareness present. And sometimes, even in the dream, you become aware that you're dreaming. That's just like when you're awake—remembering that the awareness is already there. And then, wow, here's the dream, it's happening.

Part of the reason this is such a good reminder is that often we're chasing awareness. We're trying to get it, and we're moving in the wrong direction because it's not there, wherever we're trying to go with it. It's a lot closer. So much of our effort in meditation is the effort of trying to get to where we think awareness is. And that's a kind of deluded effort. It's not going to lead us to it.

One example I like is looking for your car keys. You're looking all over for them and can't find them anywhere. You're really searching, turning the house upside down. They're not anywhere. Where are they? So you look even harder. And then after a while, you stop and wonder, where could they be? And you feel in your pocket—okay, there are my keys. I feel like a bit of an idiot when I do that. But it's very analogous to what I'm talking about.

That effort to find the keys isn't just not useful—it's actually very useful. Because if you didn't make all that effort, you might not have looked in your pocket. You search everywhere and don't find them, and that not-finding leads you to check again in a different way. So the effort wasn't wasted. In a way, it helped you arrive where you were, or where the keys already were.

In practice, it's often the search for some state of awareness, some particular experience we want to have in a given moment—which is usually not what's already happening. And then there's effort to try to get there, and it can be very frustrating. But after we look for our keys ten thousand times everywhere, we start to get more familiar with the reality that we always have the keys in our pocket, to stretch the analogy a bit.

This knowingness, this wakefulness, is actually always here, functioning. When we start to tune to that, rest in that, hang out with that more—and chase experience less—something shifts. Sometimes when something is so immediate, any effort to be in touch with it almost makes us miss it, because it requires too subtle an effort.

I have an example. I have a ten-year-old stepson, and a friend bought me a stunt kite. I don't know if you've ever seen one, but it has two strings. You fly it like a normal kite, but then you can pull on the

strings and make it do tricks. If you pull on the left side, it dives to the left. Pull on the right, it dives to the right. Pull really hard, and it spins around.

I took it with him down to the Berkeley Marina—I live in California, and there's usually a lot of wind there. When I started trying to learn how to fly this kite, I actually couldn't pull on it gently enough. I would pull, and it would just dive right down and hit the ground.

I'd try to move it to the left, and it would hit the ground. It took a while for me to get a feel for this much subtler kind of movement.

I noticed when my stepson was trying to fly it, he went through this very frustrating process of crashing the kite again and again. But he really wanted to stick with it. He was determined—that's one of the paramis, right? Determination. So he was really determined, and he was pulling on the thing, really excited, and the wind was really strong. And it kept crashing.

It was interesting to watch him go through this process. At a certain point, he kind of stopped and lay down with the kite. And when he was lying down, he could make these really subtle movements. It was beautiful. The kite was doing all kinds of things.

So in meditation—even if you don't call it meditation—just in the process of being aware with experience as it arises, moment after moment, we're going through a kind of dual learning process. One is we're learning how to be with the experience that's arising, this vast array of experiences. And that's a process. When you have time to sit as you have over an extended period, there's a deepening into layers of experience. Different kinds of experiences arise, different content. Some of it may be familiar, some of it may be very unfamiliar. And sometimes we can think we're supposed to already know how to be with everything. But the reality is we don't, and so there's a learning process. Just like with the kite.

Some of what we're being with is physical process—pain, discomfort. It's unusual to spend so much time with a body as you have been. And I imagine you've been developing a new kind of relationship to even what this is, experientially, this body. New experiences arise in it, and we crash the kite a few times—or more than a few times—and we're learning how to be with it, whatever it is, in a gentler way.

This can also be true with content, things from your history or your life, memories, your stuff, layers of it. The wonderful thing about retreat—not always easy, often not—is having time to just let some of this long unattended-to content emerge and be attended to. I really do think of it as developing a relationship, as you would with any other being. Relationship doesn't happen right away. It's a process. You need to spend time. There needs to be some care and exchange and honoring, and you need to go through—if it's going to be a really deep relationship—some struggles. That's how you build a real relationship. And so we're doing this with the vast range of our experience.

That's one of the wonderful things about sitting for so long: you see how vast human experience is. All the different moods and emotions that one experiences in a day, let alone a week—hope, despair, inspiration,

joy, sadness, fear, boredom, restlessness, anger. Often we're identified with certain of these human experiences. We're used to a few, we're familiar with them. In our lives, we tend to pay attention to them. But here we get to see that it's all here and to make room for it. It's very impersonal in that way.

Not only do we begin to become familiar with all the content of mind and body, honoring what's arising in the moment and being in relationship to that, but we also begin to develop a familiarity and relationship with the nature of experience itself, or the nature of conditioned phenomena. Conditioned phenomena includes all of this—everything that can be known by awareness, everything you can see, hear, smell, taste, touch, cognize in the mind. It's all conditioned phenomena, conditioned reality.

And you've probably heard these words, but impermanence—you have time here to get deeply familiar with this aspect of reality, that things are changing. You may see this in various ways. It's sort of unignorable. And sometimes it can be really joyful. Sometimes it can be scary.

But it's not an aspect of experience we tend to pay a lot of attention to. I shouldn't say "we"—maybe that's not true for many of you. Maybe you are paying attention to it, and that's wonderful. But I should say societally, we tend not to. We tend not to be sustaining attention long enough to notice impermanence. But as you sustain attention, it sort of starts to become really obvious.

You can't get back the experience that you had earlier today. That really great meditation—that's just impermanence. It's gone. And that moment when you felt like you just couldn't stay here another moment? That's gone too. That's a more obvious level. But we have a chance to really hang out with this reality and integrate it.

It's true too for dukkha, the kind of suffering that comes from wanting what we don't have and not wanting what we have. We get to experience that a lot. It's not so different from that chase I was talking about earlier, the search for your keys. When you're wanting what's not happening right now, there's a suffering in that. It's immediate, a dis-ease.

So we have a lot of time. I'm sure you didn't order everything that arose today—like in the morning you wrote out a menu: "First I'll have this, and then I'll have this, a little of this, a little joy, some insight, and then bliss in the afternoon." It doesn't happen like that. So there was probably something you didn't want, or something you wanted more of. And you get to feel the immediate feedback of dukkha, this dis-ease that comes from wanting and not wanting.

We have time to develop a relationship to this aspect of reality, to get really familiar with it, to become good friends. When we're in relationship like this, then things begin to shift in terms of how we relate to our good friend. You start to develop a feel—it's less of an idea and just more of a feel for whatever that movement is. It just doesn't feel right. So there's a natural settling back.

Even this move—you familiar with this one? Even that one, we kind of feel the dis-ease of it. And then we just start to soften into developing this capacity to be with whatever is arising, and to not have to pick and

choose or search and try. All of that effort—all of that moving, not wanting, wanting—that requires energy. A lot of it.

So as we develop this feel, we start to get simpler in a way. And to trust in the being with what's here right now. Not only do we begin to develop a relationship to phenomenal experience—the content, the stuff we're aware of—we also begin to develop a relationship to this beingness, awareness, knowingness itself. The beingness that itself doesn't have any content, but is what allows all of this to be known. Just that simple awareness that I was talking about at the beginning: the seeing, the hearing, the smelling, the tasting, the touching, the cognizing. It's this simple awareness. We also begin to just be familiarized with this and trust it more.

Maybe I'll share a little anecdote about over-efforting. I feel like being around a lot of kids lately, just in my neighborhood, I was seeing all of this dharma. Dharma's everywhere, but especially in these interactions.

So I was playing handball with some kids from the neighborhood—my stepson and this other kid who's about seven, so he's a little guy. They're both kind of little guys. We're playing handball against this wall. I used to be an athlete, but I didn't play much handball. They play with a big ball, and they're pretty good. Even Coltrane, this little guy, is quite good.

So I was playing with them, and I'm pretty competitive, to tell you the truth. And they're killing me at this game.

And I'm trying really hard. The worse they're beating me, the harder I'm trying. And I'm way bigger than them, so I'm throwing my weight around. At one point, Coltrane turns to me and says, "Will, don't be aggressive. It just makes things worse."

That was my little dharma teaching. I stopped. And he was totally right. Then I relaxed and stopped trying so hard, and lo and behold, I started to learn how to play handball.

I'm not going to try to relate that story to anything. You get the point.

Sometimes what we experience in meditation is really unfamiliar. It can be challenging to know how to relate to states of mind we're not used to. Sometimes just calm or stillness can be very unfamiliar, and we don't know what to do with it. The mind gets very excited—"Oh, now let me try to make something else happen." Sometimes we want to be experiencing calm so badly, for so long, and then when it comes, it's like, "What? Peace? This is boring. Maybe if I just really deepen into it, then something else will happen."

So we're getting to know these other dimensions of experience. We always say, "Oh, if I was just relaxed, then everything would be great." But we don't know what to do with relaxed. We don't know what to do with peace, with stillness. So we're getting familiar with it, learning how to hang out with stillness. And then what do you know? We have a relationship with stillness. We can actually live it and not fight it.

Sometimes, even content-wise, things about ourselves that we're not familiar with can arise—or that we've kind of known for a long time exist but that we've never really met. So it can be scary and overwhelming.

One way I sometimes think about practice is that it's like becoming indigenous to your own experience. If you were airlifted into the Amazon rainforest and dropped in the middle of the jungle somewhere, you'd have no idea what was what in that environment. You wouldn't know what was safe to eat. You wouldn't know how to get food or how to find water. You wouldn't know how to orient yourself. But if you were indigenous to that area, it would be exactly the opposite. Everything would have meaning. You'd understand where you were. You'd know how to read the conditions. You could enjoy being there, living there. It wouldn't be such a struggle for survival.

Often when we really drop in, this inner territory can feel alien. And then there's this becoming indigenous to your own experience, more and more, which makes it a lot easier to not have to run somewhere else. All that energy of trying to get somewhere else isn't so necessary, because usually it's just an attempt to get something we don't feel we have—something missing here.

Another thing that tends to lead to skewed effort as we practice, as we be here, is our really tenacious habit of identifying with what's happening as "me."

We're experiencing some restlessness or agitation, and it becomes about me. "I'm a restless person. Everybody else is calm. I've been here for however many weeks and I'm still restless." Or sadness arises. "I'm a sad person. I'm a sad sack. I'm just a bummer." We do this so quickly with experience, almost all the time. Or: "I'm having a great meditation. I'm the best yogi in the world. Everything's so peaceful. The next thing for me is robes and the mountaintop. I'll be preaching to everybody." It happens really fast too—five minutes after being a sad sack, or maybe two minutes. But when it's happening, we're really believing it.

Or, you know, "I've been practicing for fifteen years"—this thought arising in the middle of a sitting where you're struggling with something—"and I'm still dealing with this. My meditation has not led me anywhere. I haven't gotten anywhere. All this effort is wasted." That's a thought. Yes, but it becomes a reality very quickly. It's from identifying with an experience that's happening in the moment by making it me. "This is my identity now." And then, wow, then I have to make up for all the time I wasted, and I have to get somewhere finally. It's a huge project that arose in one second. I just invented a whole history and a whole future. And now I have to live out this incarnation that I've created out of a moment of frustration. It's like magic, but it's happening all the time.

That's a big part of how we create more effort-making for ourselves—from making a me out of just what's happening. We're adding me. Me wasn't there, but we made the me. Often we don't see that part. We inserted the me into nature.

Actually, we have a kind of natural intelligence about nature. We don't tend to do that with nature. Of

course, we exclude ourselves from nature—we're kind of something different, in our opinion. But when you look at nature, you don't add the me to nature.

One example of this—and I use this example all the time because I like it—is if there is a tree growing in a drought, and the leaves are falling off. It's obviously parched. It looks like it's on the verge of death. We intuitively don't say, "That tree will never amount to anything because it just doesn't work hard enough at extracting moisture from the soil." We don't do that. That would be silly. You're laughing, because we can intuitively recognize that causes and conditions contribute to the state of the tree.

It's not that we're powerless. We can affect the conditions of the tree. We can shade it and water it and put new soil there. We can tend to the tree. But that tending has a very different quality to it than, you know, "Get your tree self in gear."

Meditation becomes a struggle when it becomes that kind of personal thing—when we abstract ourselves from nature and somehow believe we're an exception to this causes and conditions phenomenon. But it's the same. You're the tree. Sorry. You may be a flourishing tree right now, and that's wonderful. But then the quality of the tending changes, just naturally.

This is one of the wonderful things about practice: we are learning experientially that we are just nature. It starts to become hard to ignore because you're not in control of what's arising. Admit it. You're not ordering what's arising. It's causes and conditions unfolding, body and mind.

So our effort in meditation can be kind of simple—just attending to what's arising in the moment as best we can, and coming back again and again to what's here. Noticing when we create a self and we create an incarnation for ourselves to live out. This is moment-to-moment rebirth. Now I'm a sad sack. Now I'm the yogi of the month. Noticing how we create time, which then may give us a lot that we need to do. "I've been here so long. Before I leave, I need to..." That's again just a thought that arises in the moment. There really is no time in that way. Experientially, it's just always this moment. It's all we have. Like awareness—there's always some knowing present, but it's always now. It's never any other time.

So just noticing when you also create some distance for yourself to traverse in meditation—the goal that you need to arrive at. That happens in time, something that you manufacture through your thinking. You just gave yourself something to arrive at.

I had what I thought was a kind of cool experience of this. I was on a self-retreat in the woods, alone for about a month. At one point I got confused about what day it was—I thought it was a Wednesday or Thursday, I don't know. And I went around for a while in this Wednesday-or-Thursday thing. At a certain point I stopped and wondered, "Where is Thursday?" And I couldn't find it. These are things we just made up—Wednesday and Thursday.

It's not that knowing whether it's Wednesday or Thursday isn't useful. We need that. I know it's Saturday; that's why I'm here. But it's also useful to see how this happens so that we're not trapped by it as if it were

a kind of ultimate reality.

I think it's wonderful what you're doing, just being here, sitting and walking. It takes a while to trust this, but in my experience, you don't have to do a lot of fancy things. Just showing up as best you can is enough, and the practice unfolds itself.

Sometimes we hear the term "right effort" and we think that's a thing we're supposed to do—I'm supposed to find right effort and then do it. But my experience is that it's a lot more generous than that. The term I like is just "good enough effort." Not right. Sometimes "right" makes me feel like I've got to get it right. Good enough effort. It's just the effort to be here. Just to be aware that we're already here. And to let that become continuous. We're already here. There is no Sunday happening. It's just a thought.

So this is recognizing that we're already here, and this is what's already happening. This is the work of meditation—just the knowing of this. Let us recognize that this awareness is here and there's experience arising. And when we forget, then we remember again. Just remember to notice.

You've probably experienced how this repeated noticing starts to lead to a kind of continuity. Without our extending these moments, they start to become continuous for periods of time—like little drops of water. First, they're just drops of water, but then they sort of become a stream. We can just be carried by the stream. It's just a metaphor, not a great one, but you get the sense of it. It's just this repeated noticing that this awareness is here. This leads to a growing continuity.

Maybe I'll stop there tonight. Let's just sit for a moment.

May the merits of our practice serve for the welfare and the benefit of all beings everywhere, including ourselves.

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