Integrity of Effort

Winnie Nazarko · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2012) · 51:26

I see I'm surrounded here by the work of yesterday on behalf of the staff. I remember the first long retreat I did here was the first year they did this, so we had no idea it was coming. You can imagine walking into the hall for the first time—nobody who was sitting knew this would happen. I can just remember walking in and laughing. So funny. And it was funny. And then of course other people had other reactions too, like "this is really weird" and "this is how they spend their time." The mind—it's all so individual.

So tonight I'm going to offer a teaching on wise effort.

Often when you think about effort, you may be thinking of it in terms of trying hard, trying a lot, or maybe being lazy. You think of it in terms of volume of effort, perhaps. There's either a lot of it, or there isn't very much, or maybe there's some place right in the middle where it's just right—but that seems to be kind of elusive. To start talking about effort, I'm not going to talk about it so much in terms of how much effort as I'm going to talk about what makes effort wise.

To begin with the classic teachings on effort, we'd have to locate it on the Eightfold Path. It's step number six, wise effort, coming after the sila group. It's part of the last set of things, followed by wise mindfulness and wise concentration. These three together are considered to be the concentration set in the Eightfold Path. If you think of it, you can see why they're clustered together. There needs to be some sort of effort made in order for mindfulness to arise. And once mindfulness is there and it's sustained, it supports the arising of wise concentration. So they come together. It's really clear that the path calls for the summoning of a certain kind of energy. No lazy people ever get enlightened, seemingly.

So that's wise effort. But then the next question is, well, wise effort to do what exactly? And like other steps on the Eightfold Path, it's wise effort to do the path. But there's another way to explain it, and the Buddha talks in terms of the four great endeavors. He says we're really making effort to do four things.

The first one is to prevent the arising of unarisen, unwholesome states. So you've got a double negative there—to prevent the arising of unarisen, unwholesome states. Or as a friend of mine says, keep yourself out of trouble. When he's talking about unwholesome states, he's talking about the defilements of greed, hatred, and delusion, and the other states that flow from these. These other states are variations on a theme, all of which are states of suffering.

So how do you prevent these from arising? Well, there's sila, the practice of basic morality. There's the practice of the paramis, the perfections of mind. There is sense restraint, guarding the sense doors—so hearing, thinking, smelling, touching, tasting, emotions aren't running rampant without there being any

adult supervision. Another way to say that is maintaining continual mindfulness. Good luck with that one, at least in the short term.

The second of the great endeavors is to abandon unwholesome states that have already arisen. They're there, these states—versions of greed, hatred, and delusion—present in the mind. What to do? These are the hindrances. So this is hindrance practice, practice with the hindrances. A lot of our practice on retreat really takes place in this particular zone, doesn't it? Variations on these things—they may be subtle, they may be gross, but they're frequent. If you were going to articulate a slogan for practicing with this endeavor, you'd say something like: don't cling to suffering when it arises. See it for what it is. Bring wisdom to bear.

These states can obscure the mind and keep mindfulness from arising and being operative. And if mindfulness isn't present, there's no ability to see clearly what's happening, nor to observe moment-to-moment experience. When you lose awareness, you lose mindfulness, and you lose the basis to establish any kind of concentration. That's why they're called hindrances to concentration.

So always in practicing with the hindrances, the primary task is to restore mindfulness. That's really the key strategy. Because if you can restore mindfulness and maintain it, then concentration will arise. And if you can know what you're experiencing continuously, your understanding will gradually fill in over time. There'll be fewer breaks in what you're observing. You'll see things more as a stream of experience, and you're really entering into a virtuous cycle.

Let's spend a few minutes talking about the hindrances, because I don't think we've really had a full hindrance talk, have we? We've had plenty of hindrances, but no talk. That doesn't seem right.

So: sense desire, also known as craving, thirsting, *taṇhā*. Ill will, also known as aversion—which can also manifest as the fear branch of that. Those are the two big heavy ones, the ones you really need to learn how to handle and work with. And then the other ones are dullness and drowsiness, better known as sloth and torpor, restlessness and worry, and doubt.

In order to work with these, you need wise attention. This is a key point, because it's not like just any attention given to these things is helpful. There are ways we can attend to these things that actually fuel them. So what would that way of attending be that fuels them? Identification with them as a me or a mine or an owned-by. Enmeshment with them. Or in some cases, indulging in them—because sometimes they can feel kind of pleasant.

For instance, if you have a craving for, let's say, lunch—because that's a major event here, isn't it? A particular thing at lunch. Say something was on the table early in the retreat, and it was just the right thing for you, very satisfying. And you're sitting in practice and you think of this. "Oh, that was so good. I wonder if they're going to have it again. I wonder if I left a note for the kitchen and told them I was having a psychological crisis and this would help me feel more grounded. And other people probably felt that way

too. And then they would put that out on the table, and it would be for the benefit of all beings. So I think I'll write the note."

And so it goes into *papañca*, right? It proliferates. And then maybe there's a fantasy of actually having the thing, and that can be kind of pleasant too. "It's going to be so good. I can imagine how it tastes." And then it can suddenly turn unpleasant because you realize you're probably not going to get it, and it all crumbles. Then it's a state of suffering. There's probably a state of aversion and judgment there.

So that's an example of unwise attending.

How then to attend wisely? The primary task is always to restore mindfulness. Always. There are many different ways to work with the hindrances, and some of them are specific to the particular hindrance. I'm not going to get into that level of detail. But just to say, some of the general techniques for working with these things include recognizing it—that is, bringing perception to bear—naming it,

noting it, which supports the arising of mindfulness. Notice if you're clinging to it, holding on to it. See if there's identification there with it. And then, of course, opening to it and investigating it—in other words, turning the mind towards it, going into direct observation of all the twists and turns that are involved with this particular state of body and mind.

Or you could employ some of the particular remedies. For drowsiness, sometimes it's suggested that you open your eyes in sitting, or stand up. With doubt, sometimes it's suggested that if there's a particular dharma question that keeps cycling and cycling, you ask the teacher the question so you can at least have it addressed. So there are particular remedies too.

But the important thing to know is that when you connect with unwholesome states skillfully, they weaken and decrease. This mindfulness stuff is pretty powerful. It has the capacity to weaken and, in some cases, suppress unwholesome states. And it simultaneously has the capacity, when directed towards wholesome states, to encourage and strengthen them.

So when we cultivate what supports our well-being, overall we're entering into this virtuous cycle where the mind is moving in a direction that builds energy, that builds capacity. If you think in terms of the seven factors of enlightenment—which I think someone is going to give a talk on pretty soon—one of these leads to another. Mindfulness leads to investigation, leads to effort and energy, leads to pīti or enjoyment. But you'll get the rest of the story later. The point is, there's a lawfulness to it all. How you look helps shape how the experience opens. So this wise attention is important.

The third of these four great endeavors that the Buddha talks about is to arouse wholesome states not yet arisen. If you were going to sloganeer on that one, you could say that wise attention makes wholesome seeds sprout. And how do we do that on retreat? Well, the process starts with the meditation instructions that we give you, because the whole point of the meditation instructions is to help you bring forward and maintain a wise view, wise attention towards what you're experiencing. The instructions I'll say to you:

look at it like this, notice this, focus the mind like this. Mindfulness is partly stimulated in this kind of setting by the meditation instructions that you're given and by your implementation of those.

The last of the great endeavors is to maintain and perfect wholesome states already arisen. The slogan I originally had for this one was "wise attention is like fertilizer." But I thought, no, not fertilizer—make it something nicer than that. So I said compost. Wise attention is like compost. In the recognition of these states, you're supporting their presence and their strengthening. And overall, when you connect with wholesome states, they increase.

These endeavors related to wholesome states are important because very often we don't see them. That's a whole other talk, but for some reason, often these don't register—at least in part because they're frequently a regular part of our baseline consciousness. We don't really necessarily see them as any big deal or any particular thing. We operate out of them a lot, actually. Or at least people do who wind up going to things like this. I mean, this is not most people's idea of entertaining themselves for three months or six weeks. So there are already a lot of these in the mind stream, but they're not necessarily seen.

So that's a good chunk of what the Buddha says about wise effort. Now I'm going to talk about an aspect of effort that is sometimes made on retreat—often made on retreat—because this is part of how we are as humans. Our mind streams are a mix of things, right? Wholesome and unwholesome things. And so when we come to practice, our motivations are also mixed. When we undertake the journey and come to practice, there are a lot of different intentions in play.

For instance, we may have a picture of where we want to go in practice and what we want to accomplish when we're here, and we want to use the retreat to get there. And often we have a very specific idea of how this should happen, where we should go, and what should happen. I'm going to give some examples of these things because I think it helps to make it specific. These are examples of some motivations and agendas that we often carry with us, whether for a whole retreat or for a sitting.

So these are kind of add-ons to the four great endeavors—our customized, idiosyncratic additions to the task that the Buddha has defined as the one we're aiming the mind towards on this retreat.

To get rid of a particular emotion or emotional pattern. To make ourselves different, into a preferred version, in some essential way. One example of this that a friend of mine gave me—and I think she'll be okay with me saying this—was that she's very extroverted, and she thought, "You know, extroversion is... it's better to be an introvert, not really needing to get the juice from people. Better to be an introvert." That would be an example of making yourself different in some essential manner. But your mind may have filled in the blanks in a different way.

To attain a particular kind of spiritual experience we've heard or read about. "I heard about this guy, he went on retreat and it was so far out—he totally left his body and was hovering above."

To prove something to ourselves or someone else. "I've never been the kind of person that could stick to

something that was hard." "My husband said I'd never be able to make it without talking for six weeks. I'll show him." Don't tell him you have teacher meetings.

To experience pleasantness, bliss, or concentration—or maybe to have a psychic experience. To impress the teachers, get recognized as special. Or for those who are into non-existence, to have my ego and/or personality disappear.

To experience again something from a previous retreat—some really good sit or realization or something—to get it again, get it back. Or, depending on how previous retreats have gone, to *not* experience something from a previous retreat.

To be a good yogi. Great, if possible.

So what happens when we use the practice to pursue these goals? If we don't identify or acknowledge these specific personal additions to the four great endeavors, or if we practice in a way that attempts to achieve these goals, this is what happens: We're looking for a particular result related to the goal. "Is it there yet? Is it there yet? Am I getting better? Is it getting closer?" We try to control what arises and what doesn't arise, because we've already said what we want to have happen. We don't bring a fresh mind to the instructions. We apply the instructions with an end in mind, or we completely disregard the instructions and do something else. It's interesting to find out on retreat how often that happens—it's like the instructions have never been employed.

We're always grading ourselves against what we want to have happening. So then the ego inflates and deflates based on our sense of success. We're not receptive to what is, so we're generally out of connection with or contact with what the predominant experience actually is. Struggle, fatigue, hindrances arise. There's an attempt to exert control, and when that fails we tend to get mad or sad. With that comes the self-judgment, the doubt, the fatigue, and lots of other hindrances.

So there are a number of problems if we don't see these agendas, if we're actually standing in them or lost in them, practicing from them and proceeding from them as a starting point and as a standard for measuring how we're doing.

Some of the problems are: We're trying to squeeze our spiritual practice into a context that's much too small, much too closed-ended, and much too specifically goal-oriented. We're starting from the wrong base and bringing an overlay to the whole situation. Instead of proceeding simply, we keep our usual approach going at the same time we're simply trying to be aware. So it's almost like there are two different things going on, which is way too complex. There's a split focus happening.

What was the phrase used to describe the process of waking up? "Untangling the tangle. Who can untangle the tangle?" This is an example of a tangle, right? There's a mental tangle, an emotional tangle happening.

We aren't really open to what is happening because we're too busy trying to make something specific

happen or to make it not happen. Since we actually don't have the ability to implement our preferences—to make happen what we want to have happen in practice—we fail. And this is always, to me, the fatal defect in any strategy: the failure of it.

I'm willing to work hard if something can work. But when it really can't, then I guess I move to the lazy end of the spectrum. I take the easy way out, which has more to do with actually working with reality in a simple way.

The other part of it is that rigidity causes suffering because it resists what's actually happening—which is another way of saying it's resistant to the truth. Our task here is actually to harmonize with the truth and not to argue with it. And as we're learning as we go along, things arise and pass away according to their nature and not our wishes.

There's this line from a song that sometimes runs through my mind when I catch myself being in opposition to what's actually happening—when I'm doing sitting practice or just in daily life. This old country western song goes, "I fought the law and the law won." It's the law. Cause and effect, it's the law. It always wins.

Now at this point you might be saying, "Well, yes, but..." Yeah but, yeah but. You know, it would be great to get rid of this pain in my back that I think is associated with chronic tension, and my life would be better and there would be less suffering if I could get rid of it. Or you might say, it is true that my mind has a lot of aversion and it's very painful and I do want it to go away.

This mix of motives can be very mixed in terms of their wisdom and delusion. Very often there is a seed of wisdom in some of the things that we want, because really what we all want at the bottom of it is the end of suffering. Where we get crossed up is when we get very, very specific about how we imagine that should come about.

So then the question is: if these are actual things that come up for us, goals that have some wisdom in them, is there a way that we can practice with them and actually integrate them into what we're doing here? Is there a way to practice that can acknowledge these without getting entangled in them and drowning in the downside?

And the answer is yes—if there's integrity of effort. Integrity of effort. Integral, congruent, integrated effort. Now we're not talking about whether we're trying hard or whether we're not trying. We're looking at things from the point of view of: is everything in the pot? Is it all in the pot? Is there one thing going on here when we're doing practice? Or is it fragmented? Are there things outside of the practice that we're using the practice to try to make happen? Or is there some way that we can bring these to be aligned?

We can practice in a way that's integrated and has integrity, and it calls for sincerity and commitment and resolve. And what's the resolve then in relationship to these personal goals and agenda? It's to regard these personal goals with wise attention when they arise. This means being process-focused in

relationship to them and not outcome-insistent.

Let's talk some more about how to work with these in an integrated way. There are different things you can do when they're present. One is to recognize them and choose to let them go. You're acknowledging them, you're opening to them, and you're saying, "Okay, I see that, I see that, and I'm just going to let go of that." Sometimes this is possible. And sometimes it's not—because sometimes it's stuck to you like super glue. The truth is you do want. You do. So it's important on some level, and it's not really possible just to put it down, put it to the side.

There's a way to work with it where you can find the seed of wisdom within the goal or the agenda and refine it. You can actually reframe goals so that they become aligned with this process and not interfering anymore. This is reframing these motivations and desires in a way that's more skillful, so they can actually become stepping stones instead of obstacles.

Let's talk about how that might be. I read you the original list. You may wonder how I come up with these lists. Well, I have a mind and I watch it.

To get rid of a particular emotion or emotional pattern.

A refined or reframed version of that might be: to learn to meet difficult emotions with compassion and courage. "To make myself different in some essential manner" could become: to open to my full potential by developing new strengths. "To attain a particular kind of spiritual experience we have heard or read about" could become: to recognize new growth and insight without attachment. "To prove something to ourselves or someone else" could be: to develop confidence and faith in my true nature. "To experience pleasantness, bliss, or concentration, maybe even a psychic experience" could become: to recognize pleasantness, bliss, and concentration when they arise, without attachment. "To impress the teachers, get recognized as special" could be: to develop my potential in order to serve others. "To have my ego and personality disappear" could become: to recognize my true nature. "To experience something again from a previous retreat or sitting" could become: to let go of all expectations, seeing the unique truth of each moment. "To not experience something from a previous retreat or sitting" could become: to let go of all expectations, seeing the unique truth of each moment. "To be a good, maybe great, yogi" could become: to practice with integrity regardless of the immediate experience.

These are examples of reframing our goals so that they become aligned with practice and non-interfering.

The third major strategy of working with these I would call renunciation. Joseph gave a whole talk on renunciation, so I'll simply say that renunciation in this context means including them in the practice, just like everything else. "Oh, but they're special. This one is different." Notice the screaming mind of clinging. "But this one is different. No, this one is really—I need this one." To include them in practice, just like everything else, nothing special.

With wise attention, you can develop a skillful relationship to these motivations, noticing when they've

become goals and not just thoughts, noticing when they're not objects of awareness anymore but there's almost the feeling that you've stepped out of meditation back to your regular self, and it's telling you what should happen.

That's an interesting point in practice, isn't it? When it kind of feels like you're meditating—you're sitting there, things are coming and going, breath is coming in and going out, hearing, seeing, smelling—and then a certain thought will arise. What I call it is falling out of meditation. There's almost the experience like you were meditating and now you're not. Now you're your regular self trying to figure out how to get back into meditation. Very often this kind of thing is operating when that happens. You're noticing when you're practicing out of, not in, the meditative process. It's almost as if you're standing in them and practicing from them.

So what happens next? You make the determination: they're in the pot too. Put it in the blender with mindfulness, just like everything else. "Oh no, not that one. Too personal. It's precious. It's important." And it is important. Very often these things are important. There's an underlying kernel of wisdom there. But the delusion is thinking we're somehow going to make it happen by something that we do that's mixed with delusion.

So we notice when these have become goals and not objects of meditation. And then what do you do? You apply the meditation instructions to them just the same way that you do to everything else. You see the arising of these personal goals as meditation objects. You can note them and name them. "Oh, this is wanting. This is fantasizing. This is trying to make something happen." And you use the standard practice instructions with them, recognizing and investigating what they are. This is a thought of a particular type. This is an emotion of a particular type.

These are the body sensations that arise after the thought or together with the thought. These are the sensations in the body that are part of this wanting. This is the vedanā of it—this is pleasant, this is unpleasant, this is neutral. The same basic process of touching, opening, examining things.

The hard part about this has two aspects. The first is the recognition that that's where the mind has gone, that's what it slipped into. And the second part is the renunciation required to actually say, "I will treat this just like everything else." You'll really see where the kick of identification is, because it very often comes up framed in these kinds of ways.

So that's the third way to work with these: recognize and let go; reframe in a way that brings them into alignment; and the renunciation of practicing with them just like you practice with anything else.

The fourth strategy is to observe closely what happens when you attempt to meditate from these perspectives. The feedback will help inform your effort, because that feedback is going to have a lot of hindrances in it and a lot of frustration in it.

Now I do want to say something about the fact that within all these very particular motivations and

agendas, there is self-compassion. That's part of the mix. We don't want to suffer. We do want to know. We do want to get rid of the back pain—and of course you do. You do want a better relationship with somebody you care about. You do want to be able to solve a life issue. You do want to have a happier mind. You do want to have a healthier body. We all do. There's nothing wrong with this.

The question is: what's the best strategy for bringing forth what's beneficial in all these very specific, personal aspects of our lives? How do we bring that forth in the best kind of way, given the main process that we've entered into here—which is the practice of the four great endeavors, in the interest of liberating the mind from suffering of all kinds?

The answer is to not crisscross these things in a way that undermines the primary goal that we're here to do.

There's a very paradoxical part of this too. In foregoing the direct pursuit of these kinds of things here, and allowing the mind to settle and clarify, allowing the body to calm and rest and to open, and to develop a certain kind of energy—with the whole process held with mettā and compassion, the energy of acceptance, the letting go of resistance, letting go of the contraction of having to have it be a certain way—you're actually setting up the circumstances for maximum benefit in many of these particular areas that are of concern.

There's a reason that mindfulness meditation is recommended for things like high blood pressure and stress-induced illness and depression and various kinds of physical diseases and conditions that are related to stress. This is good for you in a lot of different ways.

So the question is: can you trust that you will be getting benefit from this, generic benefit from this, and let go of the temptation to turn it specifically towards trying to make a particular thing happen while you're here?

To close, then: what I wish for you all is happy bodies and healthy minds, happy minds and healthy bodies, all good things in all dimensions of your well-being. May you be able to fully open to and participate in this process of the mind's unbinding—for your benefit and well-being, and for that of all beings.

Let's sit for a minute and let it settle.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.