Nuances of Right Effort

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Joseph Goldstein · 1:19:32

In many respects we can see meditation as an exploration, as a science of the mind. Because the mind and body are following natural laws, meditation is a way of exploring those laws. In that sense it's quite precise and scientific in its introspective method.

The Buddha taught with great precision about the liberating insights of the Four Noble Truths and the understanding that attachment is the basic cause of suffering. He taught with tremendous clarity about the possibilities of freedom, characterizing the whole path as coming to the end of suffering.

But meditation is also an art. It's not only in the scientific mode, it's also in the artistic mode. Tonight I want to speak about one particular quality of mind that needs to be practiced and understood in the context of meditation as an art, because it's a very powerful force that needs a very delicate touch. We need to understand the nuances of how to work with it in a very delicate and yet impactful way.

The Pali word for this mind state is *viriya*. Pali is the language of ancient India, and the texts have come down to us in this language, which is very closely akin to Sanskrit. *Viriya* is usually translated as energy or effort, although it has many other connotations. These two meanings are what I'm going to focus on this evening.

Without the development, strengthening, or application of *viriya*—of energy and effort in our lives—we simply stay caught in the habitual patterns of our conditioning. It takes effort to come out of those well-established patterns, or in a more negative way, we could say the long, well-established ruts. That's our habit. The neural pathways have been well-established in those ways. If we just let things go on as they are without the cultivation of some energy or effort, then that's our lives—just the unfolding of the habit patterns of our conditioning.

One of the problems in understanding *viriya* is that the word "effort" in English has many connotations, and it's very easy to misunderstand what effort means in the context of meditation practice. It's easy to conflate effort with an over-intense focus—we're making effort to be with the breath and we're intensely focusing. Or we might conflate it with some kind of dharma ambition and an over-striving, an over-efforting. It's very common for people in the practice, in trying to practice *viriya*, to get caught up in this shadow side of it, where we're really just making ourselves more and more tense.

Too little effort, on the other hand, leads to different problems. This is a common experience for meditators: when we're not making much effort, especially in the context of a retreat, it leads to discouragement, doubt, and disappointment. Not much is happening because we're not making enough

effort, not applying enough energy.

So we begin to see the dial: too much and we get tense; too little and we lose it, nothing much is happening, and we feel a lot of doubt and discouragement.

When we appreciate the art of meditation and see clearly the necessary and subtle adjustments we need to be making all along the way, we understand that this is not something we get and find and then have for the rest of our meditative career. This is an ongoing tuning of the mind, just as with a musical instrument. It's not that you tune it once and for the rest of your life it stays that way. It needs to be tuned each time we play. We need to tune our minds in exactly the same way.

When we do this, it arouses the interest and the energy to play at the edge of our comfort zone. This is one way of coming out of our habituated patterns—we start exploring the unfamiliar. When things, both in our lives and in our meditation practice, begin to feel a little uncomfortable, we're outside the realm of what we're familiar with or comfortable with. Maybe it's some strong emotions or some strong bodily sensations or some situation. That forward edge is exactly where we want to be.

Only if we arouse the energy to play at the edge and have interest in discovering what can be learned there will we be taken out of the dream of our lives. We're just living in the dream of our thought, emotional, and physical patterns, going along with their momentum. To awaken from that and to see other possibilities takes some effort, takes some energy.

At the beginning of a retreat, or at the beginning of your practice, people very commonly experience the mind tumbling like a waterfall—just this endless tumble of thoughts and feelings and images and distractions and hindrances. Every once in a while we remember the breath, and then again the mind is just caught up.

This is normal. It's not unusual. This is what happens as we first get started and begin to build some momentum. I think it can be reassuring to know that this is common.

It's not that this is just me and I'm a terrible yogi. This is what the mind does as we're first getting started in this process. Whether we're starting as a new meditator or just beginning a retreat, this tumbling quality is completely natural.

One of the things that I love so much about the practice is that we are continually relearning and discovering new things about some of the basic principles we may have heard at the very beginning—principles like right effort. Much of what I'm going to share tonight comes from things I'm learning now, after so many years of practice, about making right effort. It's an ongoing process of opening, and that's what makes this whole path so extraordinary. The Dharma is vast, and as we enter into it and engage, it just keeps opening to newer and newer understandings.

Let me begin by talking about the very simple effort we make to be with our primary object of attention.

Here I'll use the breath as an example, but this applies equally well to any other anchor you may be using to stabilize attention—whether that's the whole body, touch points, or sound. Different practitioners will find different primary objects to return to. For now, though, I'll use the breath.

As we pay attention to the breath, the first aspect of right effort is to refine our perception of the actual sensations we're feeling with each breath. At first, maybe we simply know we're breathing in and out without feeling any sensations. But we know we're breathing. That's enough. That's a beginning. We're there.

As we continue, we may notice the mind starts overlaying a subtle image on the breath. Perhaps we feel it like waves—a wave coming in, a wave going out. It might be some other image as well. That's okay; it's also helping us connect with the experience. But it's still an image, still a concept. So we drop down even further, come closer, and begin to feel the very specific sensations of each breath. It might be coolness or warmth, perhaps a tingling, a vibration, a slight pressure—very specific, ordinary sensations. That's the level we want to be on: close enough to feel the flow of sensations within each breath.

One of the first insights that emerges from doing this is realizing that the breath is not one thing. The in-breath isn't one thing and the out-breath another. Rather, there's a whole series, a flow of sensations constantly changing. We begin to break up the perception of solidity and see that what we call "the breath" is actually a flow of what we might call microscopic sensations—very subtle. By paying attention carefully, we begin to experience this directly.

As we engage with awareness of the breath in this way, of course the mind will wander and get lost in thought. Every time we become aware that we're lost, the practice at this point is simply to come back and begin again. Those two words are like a magic mantra: *begin again*. There doesn't have to be any judgment, any assessment, any big story. This is what happens for everyone. We're with the breath for however long, the mind wanders, we become aware of it—begin again, begin again, begin again. It's very simple. It doesn't have to be complicated, and it doesn't have to stimulate any reactivity. This is just the process; this is what happens. And it's the beginning again that strengthens and stabilizes our ability to stay with the breath. We just keep doing it over and over.

Now we begin to go beyond awareness of the actual sensations of the breath. We've established that to some extent—it's not going to be perfect, but we feel connected in some way to the actual sensations. At this point, we want to be aware not only of the sensations of the breath but also to turn our attention to the nuances of our effort. We're actually becoming mindful of *how* we're making effort. This is really important, because if we don't pay attention to that, we'll simply drop into our habitual way of paying attention—which may or may not be skillful.

And so we have to look: how am I making effort?

Sayadaw U Tejaniya was a Burmese monk and meditation master who has taught a lot now in the West.

He emphasizes the importance of paying attention to the attitude in our mind about what's being experienced. So it's not only the experience itself—it's looking at how the mind is relating to that experience. And in this context particularly, what is the quality of our effort to be with the breath? We want to pay attention to that.

This is what he said: "You do not need strong effort to be mindful." That should be a relief. You do not need strong effort to be mindful. When we are present, we become aware of what is happening. When we're simply present, being present, we become aware of whatever is arising. Simply reminding yourself to be in the present moment is all the effort you need.

So that's just a good reminder of how to look or how to assess the quality of our effort. Are we giving a little too much force, or are we simply relaxed in the present, naturally aware of the breath, each one, as it presents itself? So that's something to look at. When you're in the meditation, look at how the mind is relating to this.

Then a question arises: how do we remind ourselves to be present? All it takes is being present, but we forget that. So how do we remind ourselves in the midst of our meditation practice?

There are two elements to this exploration. The first of them, which I alluded to briefly, is becoming aware of the breathing process itself. A common tendency for people is that when we're attending to the breath, very often people experience that this initiates some kind of controlling of the breath. When we start to really be with it, somehow the very act of attention on it very often creates some kind of controlling mechanism. We're controlling the breath in some way.

As I'll mention a little later, that itself is not a super big problem, but it is easier and more effortless and relaxed when we don't control the breath. So just a few little suggestions. If you notice that you are controlling—and it can be really subtle, it's not that you're doing heavy breathing, but even just subtle, subtle control or interference with it—if you notice that that's what's happening, there are a couple of ways of stepping back from that and allowing the breath to come in its own natural way.

First, see if you have any preconception of what you think a good breath is. Because people come with all kinds of ideas about meditation, and most of them are useless. We can have some idea: "Oh yeah, when I'm meditating, it's supposed to be calm, and the breath's supposed to be nice and smooth and long and even." And then when it's not—maybe it was short or rough or agitated or whatever—we try to control it so that it becomes longer and smoother and calmer. That's a mistake, because that's just another kind of control.

Much more helpful not to have any preconception about how any one breath should be. We just settle back, aware of how it is. Do you see how simple this is? The body is breathing. We don't have to do anything. We don't have to make any effort to breathe. There's some miraculous mechanism that keeps us breathing. Even when we're sleeping, the breathing is going on. So can we just settle back in that place of

awareness? Oh, this breath is like this. This is a short breath. This is a long breath. This is a calm breath. This is an agitated breath. Just being aware, not trying to control it or make it different than what it is. That would be one thing to look at if you feel that you're controlling it a bit.

Another way of non-control—and this ties into the instruction Tara gave the other morning about "there is a body"—sometimes we're controlling the breath when our focus on it has become too narrow and we're just zeroing in on it. The very act of zeroing in can create some kind of interference. What I've noticed is that if I give myself the bigger framework, like "there is a body," or it could be sounds, you could just be sitting listening to sounds—something that gives a bigger context in which to hold experience.

So if we're resting in that bigger framework, it's easier to allow the breath just to come and go as it does because we're not zeroing in on it. It's easier for the breath to find its own natural rhythm. You might remember to do that if you find yourself creating some interference.

The last thing I'll mention, which is also very common, is that in a pattern of breathing, very often there is a pause between the out-breath and the next in-breath. In, out. In, out. It's not uncommon for people in that pause to want to hurry the next breath along, rather than simply waiting in that space of the pause and noting whatever is present there. We want to pull the next breath in so that we have it there to pay attention to. It's not unusual—we just seem to do this. Become aware of it. Again, it's just much more relaxing and easeful if we allow the breath to find whatever rhythm it's in. In, out, pause. Maybe in the pause you go to sound. Maybe in the pause you go to the whole body posture, or to some touch points where the body is touching the cushion or floor, some other place that you're aware of—just waiting until the next breath comes in its own time.

After doing this, when you practice this for a little while, the mind will begin to relax back from the different ways of controlling or interfering. And as I say, it's not that controlling is so much of a problem, because we could simply be aware of the controlled breath. We're feeling the breath in that way, and we notice, "Oh, now the breath is controlled." So it's very possible to incorporate even that into the practice. But it is more relaxing and more easeful, and the whole energy system kind of softens when we're not interfering. So it would be worth exploring a bit.

There's a Taoist expression which highlights both the naturalness and the ease of non-interference—not only with the breath, but with our whole life process. I think this is from Lao Tzu: "Sitting quietly, doing nothing, spring comes and the grass grows by itself." Nature doesn't need us to help it along. Can we just sit quietly, do nothing, but be aware? And spring comes and the grass grows by itself. Everything happens, everything flows.

It might be supportive or encouraging for you to realize that when you're with the breathing, or practicing being with any other experience in this way of just letting things come and go in their own time—no rushing, no pushing, no pulling in, just back and open and receptive—every time we're doing this, we're really learning to trust the Tao. I just like that as a concept. There's something profound going on even in

this very simple exercise.

So the next step in right effort, and this is particularly what I've been exploring recently in my practice—I found it really engaging. What's so strange to me about this whole process is, and you'll see, what I'm about to say is exceedingly simple, things I've heard for the last fifty years. But as we go, as we just keep our practice going, we can hear the same thing over and over, and then all of a sudden we hear it in a different way. We apply it in a different way. That's what keeps happening as we continue in our practice, and that's what makes it so rich. It's just a continual unfolding.

At this point, we've learned to be with the actual sensations of the breath. We've begun to watch our attitude about it—whether we're striving too much or over-efforting, whether we're pulling things in or not, whether we're controlling. So we've done all that kind of work. Now the emphasis is on the intention to have the mind be steady for the entire duration of even a single breath.

It's not enough to come into the hall with the intention, "Okay, I'm going to be with my breath for the next hour." Hopeless. Way beyond our capacity. So we make the intention, and then it doesn't work, and then again we feel disappointed or struggling or whatever. It's only because our intention was way beyond what we actually can do.

But I think everyone here has the capacity to set the intention for a single in-breath—to stay really steady on it for just that duration. "Okay, I'm going to really be close, feeling this steadily for one in-breath." And then for one out-breath. And then for one in-breath. And then for one out-breath. When we do this over and over again, this steadiness of attention becomes the default habit of our minds.

It becomes the habit of how we pay attention, because we've been practicing in a very specific and precise way for short durations.

An often unnoticed obstacle in practice to the steadiness of mind is an experience which I call the meditative disease of more or less mindful—where we're kind of mindful, we're not totally lost, we're kind of there, but not fully. I've noticed very often this common experience: we can be with the breath or a step in walking, and we are aware of the breath, we are aware of the step, but at the same time the mind is thinking about something. It's almost like there are two parallel tracks going on. Technically the mind is going quickly back and forth, but experientially it feels like they're happening simultaneously. We're walking and thinking, we're kind of with the breath but not completely.

It's very easy for this to go unnoticed because there's enough mindfulness of the step or the breath to fool us into thinking we're really being mindful—and so we don't really pay attention to the fact that all these thoughts are going along at the same time, in those moments taking us away from the breath.

I've been appreciating the word "intentionality" rather than "effort" in this situation, because somehow it feels more inviting. As I said in the beginning, the word effort has so many connotations for us, and some of them are not that helpful. But when I think that there's this intentionality dial in the mind, and we can

actually—if we notice that we're in this more or less mindful state—just slightly turn up that dial of intentionality at the beginning of each sitting, at the beginning of each breath.

At first you might actually formulate it as words in the mind, but that's just as a beginning. After a while you don't even need the words. But in the beginning it might be, "Okay, I'm going to be steady with this breath for the entire duration." You're really setting that intention. You do a few breaths and notice how that is. Is the mind really closer and more steady? Or is it still somewhat going off on that parallel track of thinking? If it is, then the next breath you just turn the dial of intentionality just a little bit.

This is the art. It doesn't take much. It takes the slightest effort, the slightest turning up of that intention. And it has been amazing to me how responsive the mind can be to the setting of that intention—that within a very few breaths in doing this repeatedly, at least for some time, the mind actually does settle into that more complete, full, uninterrupted experience. But it has to be for a duration that's within our capacity. So maybe it's just the in-breath, and then set the intention for just the out-breath. Or maybe if you're really adept, you could do both an in and out-breath. But not more than that. And then reset the intention.

Everything I'm saying about the breath and setting the intentionality to stay with it fully—noticing when we're not, noticing when we start getting into that more or less mindful space and then upping the intention a little bit—all of this is equally applicable to everything else. You can apply this in walking, in eating, in taking a mouthful of food. It's a general principle for how to actualize the deepening and strengthening of both concentration and mindfulness.

As I said, it's a quicker process than you might imagine if you practice in this way. If you don't, and we're just going along with the practice, even when we're in that more or less mindful state, mindfulness is there and we're learning and the practice is deepening—but it's a much slower process because our attention on this very subtle level is divided. I've been amazed, and again this is kind of recent, at how powerful it is and how immediately effective it is when we set the intentionality to be steady with each small unit of experience.

Is it clear what I mean by the steadiness of mind? That it's just on the object, not in that more or less place. This really transforms the practice.

Very likely you'll be interested enough to try this. And then I could well imagine you try it a little bit and the mind gets bored with it, or you fall back into the old pattern of more or less mindfulness. So don't expect it to be perfect just as you begin this practice. But I think you will have enough of an experience, even for short periods of time, of how effective it is—which will hopefully be an inspiration for you to apply this more and more often in the practice.

This fullness of attention has many benefits.

This is a powerful shift. It's a level jump, a significant deepening of the practice when the mind drops into

this level of steadiness. And there are many, many benefits from it. It can save a lot of times of distress.

I'll just tell you one story. This goes back, I think it was 1985. I was doing a retreat in Nepal with Sayadaw U Pandita. And the conditions in the monastery there were terrible. There were about five of us in one room, sleeping on a cement floor with just whatever mat we had happened to bring with us. The food was not that great. The room was right next to the latrine, so all the odors were coming in. It was just... There's a travel book written by the Australian Bruce Chatwin, and the title is *What Am I Doing Here?* — an account of all the horrible places he went as a travel writer. That question can often come up in the middle of the day: What am I doing here?

So I go into Sayadaw U Pandita and I kind of report what my experience is, the kind of grumbling in my mind. And all he said to me was, "Be more mindful. Be more mindful." And my first thought was, "Thanks a lot. Don't you realize how bad the conditions are?" But that's all he said.

So I went outside and thought, well, he's this great teacher and this is what he told me. Why don't I try it? I was doing walking meditation, and I just became more mindful in exactly the way I've been talking about — more deeply connected, not in that more-or-less place where I could be walking and still having all these thoughts about how terrible the conditions were. Just fully, fully in the experience of the sensations of movement. And all of those distressing mind states completely disappeared. There was no room for them. The mind got more concentrated, it got more peaceful.

It was amazing. It was just the most simple and one could even say generic instruction, but it hit exactly the right point. Because a lot of our distress and difficult emotions comes when we're not really being carefully mindful.

So explore this for yourself. You should not believe anything I say. You really shouldn't, because that doesn't get any place. Everything I say is just an invitation for you to look for yourself. These are just suggestions that I've found helpful over the years of my practice. Try it out and just see if it helps you. And you may discover your own ways of deepening. Take it in that spirit. It's all an exploration.

As I said, if we're monitoring the quality of our effort — which is an important step, actually being mindful of how we're making effort — then we'll notice. Is it too tight? I need to relax a bit. Is it too loose? I need to up the ante a little bit. This is a continual adjustment. You want to be paying attention to this, so we're not just coasting along in the habit pattern of how we pay attention. We're really taking that itself as an object of meditation, because that's how it can be refined and developed.

One more way of dropping into the continuity and immediacy of experience. It's very interesting... You shouldn't be doing this, but I'm going to report my experience of doing it. When I'm walking through the center and just watching people, it is so clear when people are really mindful of their movement and when they're not. It's completely obvious.

And it's common, because we're so often — especially in transition times of going from one activity to

another, or in the midst of some activity that we need to get done — we get into this rushing mode of leaning forward. "I have to get from here to the dining room," or "I have to rush through my yogi job," or whatever. So it's very easy, even in the context of a meditation retreat, to be moving about quite unmindfully because we're caught up in our idea of what we're supposed to be doing or where we're going, and not really settled deeply into the experience of getting there.

So one way of doing this is in the walking. As I mentioned, sometimes we can be aware just of the fact that we're moving, but we can also be aware of the sensations involved in the movement. It's a different level of embodiment. In the first, we're kind of there—we know we're moving, so it's not that we're totally lost—but we're not fully embodied. But if as we're walking we are actually in touch with, actually feeling the sensations of the movement, that really gets us to the inside of our body, so to speak. We're really full in the experience of it.

That makes a huge difference. I've noticed for myself in practice that when I'm moving about embodied in that way, the practice is much more continuous. And when I'm up a level, kind of simply knowing I'm moving about but not so deeply connected to the sensations of the movement, it's easier to drift into more or less mindfulness. So that's just another suggestion of how actually to do this.

When Sayadaw U Pandita first came here, the first time he taught was in 1984, and we didn't know him before then. I'm sure you've heard different stories about him—very demanding teacher and inspiring. Many of my friends and colleagues and I were sitting with him, and my colleague Sharon Salzberg was also on the retreat. She told me afterwards that for something like the first weeks of her practice—a month perhaps, it was a three-month retreat—every time she would go in for the interview, all he would say was, "What did you feel when you were brushing your teeth?" Of course, she had no idea. So okay, that was the end of the interview.

She went back and really started paying attention. What actually is being felt? Next time she'd come in ready to report on that, but he wouldn't ask her that anymore. He'd say, "What did you feel when you were brushing your hair?" This went on for weeks. But she said, as tormenting as it was, it really developed the continuity of practice to an immeasurable extent, realizing that everything is equal. Every activity we do, from the moment we wake up to the moment we go to sleep—we divide the day on the schedule, but really it's the same mind-body process going on, and we want to develop that habit of continuous attention.

So continuity, as we've talked about and we'll continue to discuss, is just super important because that's what develops the momentum of mindfulness. We need that momentum. It's the momentum which brings us to that place of real effortlessness in the practice.

I'll give an example I mentioned in the group today. If we're learning to ride a bike and we're just learning how to do it, it wouldn't do any good to say, "Well, just relax, get on the bike, relax, and then just pedal." We're going to fall over. There has to be an initial effort to pedal, to get the bike moving, to get the

momentum. And then when the momentum is there, it's possible to just be there and coast for a while, because there's enough momentum and energy to keep it going. But then at another point, that momentum fades, and we really have to start pedaling again to regain it.

It's the same thing in practice. There come times when it becomes completely effortless, and we'll talk about that a little. But we need to develop the momentum of mindfulness to actually get ourselves established there. That's why understanding right effort is so important—the reason I'm talking about it so much tonight. We need to understand how to apply it appropriately at different stages of our practice.

So the first step, as I mentioned: really connecting with the sensations of the breath, checking the attitude of the mind, working with non-interference, then the intentionality to be steady with just an in-breath or an out-breath. All of these things are what help us to build the momentum of our practice.

I want to emphasize that the adjustments we make to our effort and to our intentionality—remember that this is an art. It's very subtle. It doesn't take much. We need the most delicate touch in doing this. It's not to jump in with this big crash of "Okay, I'm going to make all this effort." Just the slightest increase of our intention to be steady will have an effect. A slight understanding that we need to relax a little more is enough.

Pay attention to this. Pay attention to the delicacy with which you adjust the effort. People are often just turning the dial too quickly, too fast, too much, one way or another. It's so subtle, but it has powerful effect.

So we've gotten this far in the practice, it's moving along, we begin to get a sense of the right effort, and we keep adjusting it.

So then at a certain point—which you've probably reached already—what we become aware of are different hindrances in the mind. That's the Buddhist jargon: hindrance. These are seductive mind states that can really take us away from the path.

Walter is going to talk in much more detail about all of these because they're really important to understand more fully. I just want to mention them in passing. There are mind states like desire and aversion, sloth and torpor, restlessness and doubt. These are the kinds of mind states that really become an obstacle if we don't know how to work with them. And each one has a very unique hook.

It's very interesting. How does aversion grab us? How do we get caught by desire? How do we get seduced by sloth and torpor? It's fascinating to look at these mind states and see: where is the seduction? Because we can know that they're not helpful and yet get caught in them again and again. This is part of the interest of the practice—just exploring our own minds, our own experience.

With regard to the hindrances, there are two general approaches. There's going to be a lot more specific detail, so this is just a general overview.

One style with regard to the hindrances—which are unskillful mind states that just lead to suffering—we might call the effort of the heroic bodhisattva. The Buddha before his enlightenment was called the bodhisattva, the being going towards full awakening. As a bodhisattva, he struggled with the hindrances just like all of us. He was from the warrior caste and had this warrior mode of effort. This is what he said, his expression of his approach: "If the end is attainable by human effort, I shall not rest or relax until it is attained. Let only my skin and sinews and bones remain. Let my flesh and blood dry up. I will not stop the course of my effort until I win that which may be won by human ability, human effort, human exertion."

That's planting the flag. And there's something inspiring about that, to me anyway. Here was somebody for whom that was the appropriate way—just arousing this heroic effort. "I'm going to deal with this." It's said that on the night of his enlightenment, he sat down with the resolve: "I'm not going to get up from this seat until full awakening." Imagine coming into the hall with that resolution. You could try it.

Even if we don't quite reach his level—but that is an approach. There are some people for whom that's the natural way. They're inspired by the challenge of difficulty. "Okay, I'm going to do this." So it would be worth seeing whether that's a part of yourself you could tap into, really arousing that heroic quality of effort.

There's another approach which is quite different. We might call it the approach of the gentle warrior. It's exemplified by Thich Nhat Hanh, whom many of you might know—Vietnamese meditation master, poet, and peace activist, quite an exceptional being. This is what he wrote about anger and aversion: "The Buddhist attitude is to take care of anger. We don't suppress it. We don't run away from it. We just breathe and hold our anger in our arms with utmost tenderness. The anger is no longer alone. It is with our mindfulness. If you keep breathing, shining your compassion and understanding on it, your anger will soon crack and you will be able to look into its depths and see its roots."

That's a whole different approach. That's perhaps how a mother would be with her child—maybe the child is having a tantrum,

If the mother happens to be in a mode of patience, you would just be there and supportive. You wouldn't necessarily at that point, if you're in a good space, get angry or get reactive. You wouldn't say they shouldn't be feeling it. It's okay. We would just be there in a loving way with the difficulty, and just that attitude allows it to pass through.

So what's interesting is we know almost instinctively what the right attitude is if we were with a child, but we rarely apply it to ourselves. We rarely think, "Oh, what's the right attitude for me to have with these difficult emotions?" And it's usually not that. Usually we get caught up, we justify them or we judge them, and not just be with it in this loving, tender way.

Both of these approaches are useful for different people and for each of us at different times. If we're filled with a lot of self-judgment or self-hatred or unworthiness—if that has been our conditioning for whatever

reason—then this kind of hard-hitting heroic effort, "I'm going to overcome these defilements," may not be the right approach. It may just be increasing the self-judgment. And so if that's our mode, we would want the Thich Nhat Hanh approach: just more gentle, more open, more tender with it.

On the other hand, or at different times, if we're continually indulging these unwholesome states—which can happen, like desires and fantasies or what we feel is justified anger—if we're just endlessly caught up in these, then the more heroic approach might be exactly appropriate. Okay, enough. That can be done without aversion.

At one point in my practice when there were a lot of desire fantasies coming up in my mind, and I saw that they were there—so I was mindful to that extent—but they just kept coming. I was trying lots of different things, and then finally it was almost like taking out the sword of wisdom. Okay, enough. Joseph, do you want to think or get enlightened? I gave myself a talking to. And it helped, because my mind had just gotten too allowing for something that was unhelpful and unskillful.

So do you see how at different times each of these approaches can be helpful? It's not that one is right and one is wrong. We have to see what's appropriate.

Another general framework for understanding different approaches to practice and different applications of right effort involves two approaches which have been called "building from below" or "swooping from above." They're two quite different approaches, but I've found them very interesting.

Building from below starts with an awareness of the suffering that we're in, whatever it is—whether it's physical suffering or psychological, emotional, situational. Building from below really connects us with the reality of our present experience. We're not denying it, we're not trying to cover it, we're not bypassing it. We're really there and we're looking carefully at the nature of the suffering, beginning to work very specifically with the nitty-gritty of our experience—working with the hindrances very directly and seeing how we can free ourselves from them. Building from below connects us with the immediacy of what's happening right now, particularly in times of difficulty or challenge.

Swooping from above begins with a glimpse, or even a momentary recognition, of the open, innate wakefulness of the mind—that there's a quality of awareness or wakefulness that is innate to the mind. We could connect with the mind's essential purity and then practice stabilizing that glimpse.

Do you see the difference? One is just diving into the difficulties and challenges, trying to understand them and work through them. The other, the swooping from above, is we touch or taste or recognize the essential purity of the mind that is already there. It's not something we have to get. We get a glimpse of that, and then we practice stabilizing it.

Both of these approaches are grounded in the teachings of the Buddha.

So one perspective is highlighted where the Buddha said, "I see no beginning to beings who, obstructed by

ignorance and ensnared by craving, are hurrying and hastening through this round of rebirths." This is samsara, beginningless. We've been hurrying and hastening through these rounds of rebirth, fueled by ignorance and ensnared by craving. This is where the building from below comes in—this ignorance has been with us from beginningless time. We have to understand it. We have to really go into it in order to free ourselves.

On the other side, the Buddha talked about the nature of mind being luminous. It is defiled by visiting defilements. The nature of the mind is luminous; it is freed from visiting defilements. In this perspective, the highlight, the understanding, is that the mind is essentially pure, but the defilements come at certain times, under certain conditions—they are not inherent to the mind. They're visitors to the mind. From that understanding, we can see: can I recognize and rest in the innate purity?

These are the two approaches—building from below, swooping from above. Although given the choice, we would probably all opt for innate purity. Oh yes, let's just rest in the innate purity of mind and sail onward! But it's important to remember that both are simultaneously true. It's not that one is true and one is not. They're both true. And we need to be honest about where we are in our practice and see which perspective at any particular time will help. Because if we apply the wrong perspective, it just creates more suffering.

If our minds are continually distracted, just jumping from one thing to another—that is not uncommon—we're just going along without any stability of attention or awareness. The suggestion "Oh, well, just rest in the natural purity of your mind" is not going to have much meaning. We're not even able to rest with the breath. To give this very high teaching—rest in the purity of the mind—is just not appropriate for where we are. Building from below will be much more helpful. We really go into the hindrances and understand them, developing some facility for freeing ourselves from them.

If, on the other hand, the mind is very self-judgmental and we're caught in a lot of striving and struggling, with tremendous tension in how we're practicing, moments of swooping from above may be exactly the right thing. Just the reminder: "Oh, already aware. There's nothing I have to do to get it. It's already here."

I had this experience on one retreat with Sayadaw U Pandita, where striving—its shadow side—made it very easy to fall into striving mode in that system. It has to be done skillfully. But at one point I was caught up in unskillful striving and wanting and expectation. Having been familiar with these other teachings, I just reminded myself in the midst of that struggle: "Oh, Joseph, already aware." It was amazing. Instantaneously, I could feel my mind relax back from all that wanting and expectation.

Do you see how the two approaches really feed each other and support each other? We can use them at different times.

I'll close with two stories. They're actually stories of two Greek myths which illustrate how each of these approaches—swooping from above and building from below—has both a strength and a weakness. The

strength of one addresses the weakness of the other, which is why I've found that somehow holding both allows us to navigate skillfully through our experience, applying the appropriate perspective.

The first myth is the story of Daedalus and Icarus. Daedalus was a master craftsman of ancient times who was being held on the island of Crete by its rulers, and he wanted to leave. So he crafted wings out of wood, applied feathers, and attached everything with wax. He created a functional wing—this obviously is story and myth—and he was able to fly with these wings. He made a pair also for his son Icarus, since they were both being held captive. Daedalus cautioned his son: "Don't fly too close to the sun, because it will melt the wax." But Icarus, being an enthusiastic young man with his first set of wings, flying through the air, went up toward the sun. Sure enough, the sun melted the wax, and he fell into the sea and died.

If we're using the swooping from above at an inappropriate time or in an inappropriate way, that's what can happen. We think we're applying some high, profound teaching, but we're not in a place at that particular point where it's going to be the right teaching. "Oh yes, it's all pure, it's all innately pure and eternally aware." But if we're not actually in that space and we're just imagining that we're practicing that, we come crashing down.

On the other side, when we need—

that swooping from above. This is a poem from a book called *Parables and Portraits* by Stephen Mitchell, and it's about the story, the myth of Sisyphus. You know he was condemned to roll this huge stone up the mountain, and just as he reached the top, it would fall down to the bottom. His eternal punishment was that endless labor.

So this is Stephen Mitchell's take on this myth, and I really like this:

We tend to think of Sisyphus as a tragic hero, condemned by the gods to shoulder his rock sweatily up the mountain, and again up the mountain, forever.

Sometimes our lives may feel like that—we're just endlessly shouldering the struggle of our lives.

The truth is that Sisyphus is in love with the rock. He cherishes every roughness and every ounce of it. He talks to it, sings to it. It has become the mysterious other. He even dreams of it as he sleepwalks upward. Life is unimaginable without it, looming always above him like a huge gray moon. He doesn't realize that at any moment he is permitted to step aside, let the rock hurtle to the bottom, and go home. Tragedy is the inertial force of the mind.

This is the other side. We can get so caught in the story of our lives—and we all have our stories—the challenges and the difficulties and the suffering and all of it. That's like the rock that we're pushing up this mountain. And in many ways, just as in Stephen's interpretation, in some way we have fallen in love with our story, even when it involves a lot of suffering. We just keep on with the same patterns, doing the same thing again and again, which creates the same kind of suffering, not realizing that we're permitted at any

time to step aside, let the rock hurtle to the bottom, and go home.

In this example, going home is that connection to the innate purity of mind, to the innate awareness of mind. We don't have to work through every life situation or every struggle or every difficulty through analysis and investigation and all of that—although at times that's what's needed. We don't want to be Icarus trying to fly to the sun at the wrong time and crashing to the earth. But we also don't want to be Sisyphus, endlessly in love with our suffering and our story. We can see that there is a way to actually touch a place of freedom that is always here.

I hope you've gotten some sense of the dimensions of the practice and how right effort is just this exploration: How do I explore this whole domain, from the very specifics of working with the breath and the steadiness of mind and intentionality, to the larger frame of understanding what's our basic relationship and what's the appropriate response to the situations of our lives? Is it building from below, really getting in there and uncovering and discovering? Or is it swooping from above, really having a glimpse, even a taste, of that freedom that is already here?

This is the joy of the practice and the interest of the practice. It's not always easy. It's challenging. But that's okay. It's good to be challenged.

May the merit of our practice and our time together be dedicated to the welfare and the happiness and the awakening of all beings everywhere.

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