On Effort

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 1:07:12

Tonight, by special request, we're going to talk about effort.

I mentioned many years ago that in the 80s, I spent a lot of time in and out of Thailand—in the latter part of the 80s as a bhikkhu, before then as a layman. When I was still a layman, one place I always visited was Wat Suan Mok. They had this program going where they would teach retreats for lay people, usually spaced-out hippies from the nearby tourist islands. In one of these retreats, very unusually, Ajahn Po gave us a talk. The star of the monastery was Ajahn Buddhadasa, who gave these magnificent Dharma talks, but the abbot was Ajahn Po.

He ran the place, and I was very impressed by him. He's one of the best monks I've ever come across. If you were looking for him, you were just as likely to find him up on the roof hammering a nail for the repair of the buildings as to find him anywhere else. He was in many ways a model of how to be a bhikkhu. So I had a lot of time for him, but I had never heard him give a Dharma talk. His English wasn't that good and he was a man of action rather than of words. So when he turned up to give us a talk, I thought, this could be good.

He sat down, looked at us, and his opening line was: "Meditation is war." He glared at us and said, "War against what? Defilement. War against defilement. What is defilement? Lust. Lust is defilement." He proceeded from there, but from that point he completely lost his audience—which I'm certainly not interested in doing.

But this "meditation is war" is a traditional motif to describe what meditation practice is all about. Sayadaw U Pandita was very fond of the image. He described the relationship between serenity and insight meditation: insight meditation is like you're charging across no man's land with a fixed bayonet and the enemy are just blasting away at you, whereas every now and again it just gets too much so you dive behind a boulder—and that's serenity practice.

This way of looking at meditation, which again is very traditional, emphasizes the aspect of commitment, energy, effort, perseverance, self-reliance—all those qualities. Courage, determination. The image is based on a quite realistic appreciation of our situation.

The fact is that we are stuck in our suffering, and what we want is to move towards transformation. It's up to each one of us. No one else can do it for us. Buddha is not about to descend from his altar and give us a helping hand. No amount of praying will make the slightest difference whatsoever.

In embarking on this project, what it requires us to do is to go against a lifetime of habits. We have been

carefully cultivating habits which the Buddha would call akusala—unwholesome. We have been vigorously doing this for our entire lives and then suddenly we are expected to go in the opposite direction. If I don't do it now, it won't be done. So you can see where they're coming from.

As Ajahn Po pointed out, meditation is war on kilesa—defilement. Defilement is the standard translation of the Pali word kilesa, and we've spoken about this earlier in the retreat. In the Pali tradition, kilesa is taken from the verb kilesati, to stick, to adhere. The image is: if you have a white cloth and you get some mud, you throw it at the cloth, the mud sticks to the cloth, the cloth is dirtied—it is defiled. So, defilement.

But what the image is presenting is an image of stuckness. The problem is the mud is stuck to the cloth. Now there's no problem with the cloth and there's no problem with the mud. The problem is the stuckness. This is the essence of kilesa. It's literally more stuckness than defilement, but we are defiled by this condition of stuckness. In other words, by what we cling to.

It's all about our clinging. When we take up a meditation practice, we're going against these deeply ingrained patterns of clinging, launching ourselves into a journey we have never attempted before. We're heading to a destination that we have no understanding of. So, not so easy.

What this practice will reveal to us very quickly and efficiently is exactly our obsessions—what we're stuck to, what we cling ferociously to. This is what will be revealed, again and again and again, most obviously in the experience that we call distraction. This past month we've spent a lot of time talking about distraction and how to work with it.

So this image of war has got something on its side. But it does have one disadvantage, because war always entails winning and losing. In this particular war, I'm battling against myself. This is a civil war—some parts of me want to get enlightened, versus other parts of me that say, "Nah, I just want to relax. I want to keep doing what I've been doing." If I'm in battle against myself, then ultimately I have to lose. I must be on the losing side.

What inspires my heroism in this war? It's my desire for a better self. I'm not really satisfied with the self that I've got. I wish I could trade it in and get an upgraded model, but it's not so easy. I come to the meditation practice hoping that I will be improved in some way by the experience.

Now, this is a war that I'm already familiar with in my ordinary everyday life. This is the war that we see in consumerism and ambition. I don't like what I've got. I want something better. So I'm going to struggle to get it in the belief that once I get it, then everything will be okay. There's a quality of drivenness in this project. This is what the Buddha calls taṇhā—literally thirst, but usually translated as craving.

When I come to the practice, I import this relationship into what I'm doing. But the weird thing is that what brought me here is the realization of the futility of living like that. I've been on the planet long enough to realize that it actually doesn't work. I'm always struggling for something or someone better to turn up in the future, and it never does. This is what brings me to meditation in the first place.

What I find is that I import into my meditation practice the very condition that I'm struggling to escape from. It's like I am charging into battle, but the enemy is the one who is charging into battle. So I end up going around in circles.

When I get into this struggle, into this war, it's easy to forget that the only strategy that can actually win this war is what we could call presence—being present. We could call this a chosen intimacy with whatever is happening. This is a strategy of play rather than of conflict.

Play is similar to war in that it requires energy and commitment, but unlike war, it does not look forward to a result, and in particular to the right result. It doesn't look forward to anything beyond itself. When we're playing, what we're doing is just playing. We're not trying to get something out of it. We're just playing.

When we look at the pain that drives the practice in the first place—why we come here, the pain that we're trying to escape from—we realize that this pain comes precisely from our failure to be intimate with the present. We have developed a habit of hurrying towards the future, and we do this because we imagine that it will bring us closer to what we actually want.

So we're always disconnecting from this, which is happening now, because we're busy grasping something else, something that will be realized only in the future. But it will never be found now. It's always in the future. We're moving towards a better future, and we're doing this all the time. Of course this has become a whole ideology—an ideology of progress.

But when we do this, we find that we're permanently disconnected with what's actually happening now. And this disconnection guarantees that our pain keeps going, continues.

So what we're looking for is a sense of play, which is the practice of this moment for its own sake.

When we're battling for something, what we are battling for is always something that will come in the future. And right now we can know it only in the form of an image that the mind throws up—an image. So we're disregarding the present in order to lean forward and hold onto an image which, when we look at it, has power over us precisely because it feeds our obsession with ourselves. Because the images that constitute our imagined victory are all characterized by a very strong sense of "me finally arrived at the place that I've always wanted to be"—because in that place I become the person that I've always wanted to become, no longer this person who isn't good enough, he's never good enough.

So this relationship to the practice is always looking forward, projecting forward, leaning forward, grasping forward. And that necessarily results in a disconnection with the actual experience that's happening now.

Now, before the Buddha became the Buddha, when he was still Siddhartha and a Bodhisattva, that was exactly the trap that he found himself in. And we talked about this earlier in the retreat when we were

talking about the middle way. In his later years, he was reminiscing with his students about what he did in his ascetic practices before he attained awakening. And he described his practice, his approach to practice in this way:

"I thought, suppose with my teeth clenched and my tongue pressed against the roof of my mouth I beat down, constrain and crush mind with mind. So with my teeth clenched and my tongue pressed against the roof of my mouth I beat down, constrained and crushed mind with mind. While I did so, sweat ran from my armpits."

So we've already gone through this passage. Siddhartha was crushing mind with mind. He was definitely at war.

And to do this kind of practice, he must have been looking for a result. He must have been looking for something which would happen next—some reward for his effort. So he had an image of himself as being fully awakened, and he wasn't prepared to settle for anything less. That's why he walked out of his previous practice communities. And if only he could work hard enough, he could fulfill that ambition.

And the ascetic practice is the practice of the macho workaholic: "I've just got to work harder." And if he was not yet awakened, then obviously he wasn't working hard enough. So he had to work harder and harder and harder.

And it got to the point where, as he explained to his students many years later:

"I thought, whatever painful, wracking, piercing feelings due to exertion practitioners have experienced in the past, in the future, or in the present, this is the utmost. There is none beyond this."

It's like, what is humanly possible to do? I have done. I cannot work any harder. I can't even keep working this hard for very long because I'm going to die soon from my effort.

And he goes on to say: "Yet I have not attained any state surpassing the human by this racking practice of austerities, any distinction in understanding and seeing worthy of cultivated ones."

So you could say that Siddhartha found himself in the situation in which he had won the race. No one was as hard working or as effortful in his practice as he was. He had succeeded all expectations in his performance review. And yet, still, it wasn't enough. He still hadn't attained what he was looking for. He still hadn't attained peace.

Now—and this is another issue that we've been talking about during this retreat—you notice that when Siddhartha was doing this kind of practice, he was caught up in the reality of time. Time, to him, was very real. Now I suffer. Later I'll get the payoff. And I'm putting up with this suffering now because of my belief in the future payoff.

Later on, in the Sweet Essence, which we also went through, we saw that if he's obsessed with time—with

the reality of time, the belief in the future and in the past—then he was caught up in papañca, conceptual proliferation, as we translated it, or complication. In other words, his conceptual mind is in hyperdrive.

And when we're caught up in time like he was, then we're also caught up in self, because the self requires time. I can't believe myself to be me without a felt sense of the reality of the past and the future. It's incoherent for me to believe that I am Patrick who is the teacher without a sense that I came in here before and I will leave later. Without that, I can't sustain the identity.

And our relationship to time and to self is closely related to our relationship to effort. So we're striving to get something. This very project assumes the reality of the future. It assumes the reality of the image that I have in my mind of what it is that I'm striving to get. It assumes the reality of the one who is doing the striving and the one who will be finally triumphant over all difficulties and achieve whatever it is that I'm trying to achieve.

And we find it frustrating because no matter how hard we try, what we're looking for hasn't arrived yet. Sometimes it turns up briefly, but then it crumbles. So we've got to start again.

And since what we want isn't happening, we assume we must make more effort. Obviously we're not trying hard enough. So we push harder, or we collapse in exhaustion because it's all too difficult. We pick ourselves up off the floor and try again, only to collapse once more. Try, collapse, try, collapse. And we get caught up in that civil war we've been discussing.

I'm reminded here of my old teacher, Sayadaw U Pandita, who tended to encourage this kind of relationship. His catchcry, at least what I remember from many years ago, was basically "more effort." Make more effort.

In the traditional Mahasi approach in Burma, people would undertake two or three month retreats. The bhikkhus traditionally observe vassa, a three-month retreat period each year, so a three-month retreat is very traditional. Lay people, who comprised most practitioners at these centers, settled on two or three months as an appropriate duration because they felt this gave enough time to develop the momentum required for meditators to attain the first stage of awakening. If they didn't achieve this in that period, they were much better off going home, taking a break, and returning the following year.

The government at the time—this was early independence, from the late 1940s into the 1950s—actually encouraged this kind of project. If you were a civil servant in Burma, you could take meditation leave, paid leave to go and meditate, because the government was very enthusiastic about supporting this practice.

When they began bringing in foreigners, however, a different dynamic emerged. You had people coming from the other side of the world who managed to land in Burma. Once they left, the teachers had no idea whether they would ever see them again. So if they were there, the teachers wanted to keep them there until they achieved results. The problem was that Westerners proved much slower than the Burmese in

making progress. Burmese practitioners advanced much more quickly. Westerners were very slow.

So they needed more time. The attitude became: you just keep going until you crack it. Just keep going. People would stay six months, a year, two years, doing this very intensive practice—compared to which what we're doing is a holiday camp.

During my time there, the foreigners had their own meditation halls, basically because the Burmese were so fascinated by foreigners who came to meditate. They always divided by gender—men's meditation hall and women's meditation hall. There were more women's halls because many more women meditated than men—at least two women's halls and one men's hall.

Every single day in the men's hall, at least one Burmese lay meditator would approach me because he was so happy and pleased that a foreigner was coming to practice Buddhism. He simply had to talk to me and express what a wonderful thing it was. So every day you were being interrupted by these enthusiastic characters wanting to talk. Eventually, the teachers created a separate meditation hall for foreigners to protect them from the curiosity of the Burmese. We had the foreign meditators' men's hall where I used to sit.

There was a period when this hall became characterized by the greatest epidemic of sloth and torpor I have ever witnessed in my entire life. It was phenomenal. I used to meditate with my eyes open because of my early Zen training, so I could see all of this. It was a marvelous symphony of sloth and torpor going on all the time. And strangely enough, people were not making very good progress.

The atmosphere, the culture, was one of heroic effort. You would hear muttered conversations. According to the schedule, you were allowed to sleep four hours per night. If you wanted to know why, the answer was simple: Buddha slept four hours. If it's good enough for Buddha, it's good enough for you. So four hours of sleep per night was scheduled.

Sometimes you would hear these whispered exchanges: "How many hours are you sleeping?" "Four." "I'm sleeping three." There was this macho drive. And of course, everybody was completely exhausted and falling asleep all day in the hall, completely bogged down.

U Pandita felt he had to stimulate something, so he gave us a talk about effort—the three stages of right effort. He compared it to a three-stage rocket, being very scientific. The first stage has enormous engines and incredibly powerful thrust, and the rocket starts to rise, defying gravity.

Heroic effort, heroic effort.

And then finally you get some momentum and the first stage drops away—it's the second stage. And then you have to make more effort, more effort. And then finally you get into orbit and the second stage drops and you've only got the third stage. And what do you do? You make more effort.

He hammered on for about an hour. I don't know about anybody else, but I was utterly demoralized. One

of the meditators went to see him later, privately—not even through the interpreter—and said, "Sayadaw, I can't even make it to the first stage of heroic effort. Am I just wasting my time here? Should I just go home?"

And he said very quietly, "Look, don't pay any attention to what I'm saying. I have to say these things. Just pay no attention. Just pay no attention. I have to say these things."

So it was very strange. We were caught up in this culture gap. The teachers had to say certain things, regardless of whether or not it was a good idea. That was their job. That was what was expected of them. Their job is very tightly controlled by the culture.

And I noticed one night, according to the schedule, the hall would close at 9 PM. There was an 8 to 9 sitting. From 9 to 10 PM there was walking meditation outside. From 10 to 11 was the final sitting period, which was done inside your room. Eleven o'clock, go to bed. Four AM, get up. Hall opens at 5 AM.

One night I came out of the hall for the 10 to 11 walking meditation. I was doing my walking meditation and I stopped and I looked around and I thought, "Where is everyone?" And I realized, of course, all the Burmese have gone to bed. Obviously. And they'll be in the hall at 5 AM the next morning.

In other words, in Burma, Burmese are quite relaxed. Now, if you want this much effort out of a Burmese audience, you demand this much. But if you've got fanatical foreigners who've gone all the way there to attain enlightenment and they hear the demand for this much, what they'll try to do is this much. So a lot of this was cultural confusion that was going on.

But this rhetoric of "more effort" is very characteristic of the Burmese, and frankly a lot of it is just kind of PR. It's not to be taken all that seriously. But people have got caught up in it.

If we're looking for what the Buddha calls right effort, samma vayama, it's found in the commitment to recognize what is already here. It's got nothing to do with what we imagine might happen in the future. This I think is really important.

Right effort has got nothing to do with what we imagine might happen in the future. I'm not striving for anything. What I'm striving to do is to recognize what is already here.

So let's look at how the Buddha speaks about effort. We'll go through a few texts. There's one discourse called "An Auspicious Night." And the center of it is this verse about the practitioner. Just a little bit that I want to present here.

The Buddha says: "Do not run after the past, nor long for the future. The past is left behind and the future not yet reached. Instead, see deeply into each presently arisen phenomenon while neither scattered nor disturbed."

So, first of all, the relationship to time. Do not run after the past nor long for the future. Time gets in the

way. And time presents itself as mental images. That's all it presents itself as. And these images, of course, can be accompanied by a great deal of energy that we feel in the body and in the mind.

So coming to the end of a retreat, typically most people's mind thoughts are preoccupied by future rather than past. And images of the future have a very strong flavor of reality and they stimulate a lot of energy. We've built up a lot of energy in the retreat and now this energy is being harnessed by fantasies about the future.

The future comes to us only as a concept, only as an image. So do not run after the past nor long for the future. The past is left behind, the future not yet reached. In other words, they don't exist except as presently experienced phenomena.

Instead, see deeply. This "see deeply" - the verb in Pali is *vipassati*. The noun is *vipassana*. So we know vipassana as insight and we normally see it as a noun, but it's also a verb: the verb "to insight," and here translated as "to see deeply." But insighting is an activity; it's something we're meant to do.

Instead, see deeply into each presently arisen phenomenon. It can only be done in the present. The object of the investigation can only be the present, because that's all that exists. We cannot insight past or future. We cannot insight our past records of failures. We cannot insight our hopes and desires for the future. We can only insight this, now.

Now it's possible that right now is arising thoughts of the past or the future. We insight them as they arise. But you notice that the relationship to time is one of dismissing the reality of time and just staying with the present. The practice can only be done now, and the result of the practice can only be experienced now. We cannot experience a future result. It just cannot be done.

So what we're looking for is a sense of commitment and a relationship to the present which is characterized by a sense of harmony. And there's a pleasure in it, because with this relationship we no longer need to look to an imagined future for something we feel is missing now. That relationship is painful - it's *dukkha*. The sense that there's something missing and I've got to grab something in order to ease the present suffering. But when we don't have to look to an imagined future, there's a sense of ease, balance and harmony in that relationship.

And as we said, we find this relationship in play. When we play, we're doing... Well, the opposite of play, to me, is work. And when I'm working, I'm doing something now in order to gain something else later on. So when I had a day job, I would turn up at the office, not because I particularly wanted to turn up at the office, but because at the end of the week I wanted the cash. This is work.

Now, one could, of course, go to the office and play, which would be a much better relationship. I sometimes find that relationship in my work, and it's really nice when I find myself doing something and I forget about anything else - because I'm not looking for a future result, I'm just doing it for the sake of doing it. And there is an ease and a pleasure in that relationship. When we're playing, we have nothing to

gain and so we have nothing to lose, and it's a whole different relationship.

And so in this practice we've been emphasising the play aspect. Don't stress out. Plenty of time. No set schedule. Explore. Be interested. Be curious. What's going on here? What's this all about? Try this. Try that. Experiment. See if this works. See if that works. If you're interested in it, go for it. All of these kinds of structures and instructions are designed to try to cultivate a sense of play, which has a lot to do with effort.

So in one discourse - and we've looked at this before - the Buddha compares right effort to music. And this is the famous story about Venerable Sona. Sona, as we said, was a rich young man who got religion and became a bhikkhu, and he was one of these young macho types who was determined to make it to full enlightenment as soon as possible. But he was becoming disheartened because no matter how hard he worked, he wasn't getting a good result. So he would work harder, but he still didn't get a result, so he worked harder.

And he was just getting completely fed up with the whole thing. And the Buddha was called in to talk to him, and of course the Buddha would have recognised exactly this pattern because that was what he did when he started out. So the Buddha spoke to him about his practice of music when he was a layman. Sona played the veena, which is an earlier version of the sitar - a stringed instrument. And the Buddha asked him to reflect on his experience as a musician: "When the strings on your veena were too tight, was it well tuned and easy to play?"

Well, no.

When its strings were too loose, was your Veena well tuned and easy to play?

No.

When its strings were neither too tight nor too loose, but adjusted to a balanced pitch, was your Veena well-tuned and easy to play?

Yes.

So too, Sona, if effort is too forceful, this leads to agitation, and if effort is too weak, this leads to stagnancy. Therefore, resolve on a calmness of effort, attain balance of the faculties, and there take up the meditation theme.

Avoid being too forceful, avoid being too weak. If there's too much force, there's some kind of agitation. If there's not enough effort, there's a sense of stagnancy. And so finding right effort is very largely a matter of recognising wrong effort and having recognised it, doing something about it.

So is there a sense of strain, of agitation within the citta, within the heart-mind? Maybe I'm trying too hard. And maybe that trying is a pushing away of something I don't want to see, or a desperate grabbing

onto something in my obsessions.

Is there stagnancy? Is there a dullness in the mind? So what's happening there? And if I need to stimulate energy, how would I do it? It might be simply getting up and walking or moving in the open air. Or it might mean more effort in the sense of closely focusing on the meditation object.

But there's a continual tuning of the instrument that's required. And the tuning is effort. The effort factor is this process of tuning the instrument so it's just right, not too tight, not too slack. And we can tell that's the case when the music comes out satisfactory. So it's the quality of the music that tells us where we are.

In another discourse at Devadaha, the Buddha addressed this whole issue of too much effort. This discourse is quite interesting. It's very philosophical. And it's a debate that the Buddha has with Jain ascetics. And one of the reasons why it's interesting is because he's debating, as it were, with his former self. When the Buddha was practicing, he did this ascetic practice and he recognised what was wrong with it and its futility, and then he discovered what actually works. So now he's talking to other people who are caught up in that same ascetic practice and he's putting the boot into them and he knows exactly where to aim it because he was in that same boat.

But there are also some philosophical aspects as well which are quite interesting. The Buddha spends a fair bit of energy tearing apart the idea that everything that happens in the present is the result of past karma. And that view has crept into Buddhist traditions although he did his best to actually get rid of it.

But anyway, at one point, he gets onto the question of how action and effort can be fruitful. He often used agricultural metaphors. So I'm working in the fields. I want a fruit. I want a result. So how can I practice in such a way that I will get a result?

So he says, how is action fruitful? How is effort fruitful? Here a practitioner is not overwhelmed by dukkha and does not overwhelm himself with dukkha. He does not give up the pleasure of the dharma and is not infatuated with that pleasure.

So it's interesting that he starts with the question of pleasure and pain. If we have this habitual attitude of too much striving, practice becomes a bitter pill that we have to swallow if we are to get well. So we may be overwhelmed by dukkha or overwhelm ourselves by dukkha, bringing too much pain into the practice when it's actually, at best, not necessary. At worst, it just gets in the way.

So the first thing he does is draw attention to issues of pleasure. He does not give up the pleasure of the Dharma. Literally, it's dhammika sukha, dharmic pleasure. And this pleasure of the Dharma has a lot to do with again the relationship to time. So in that discourse on an auspicious night, the night is auspicious precisely because of the giving up of past and future. When we live in the present, there is a pleasure in that. So when I'm present...

This ordinary everyday experience can give us tremendous pleasure—the pleasure of the weather, the

environment, the simple joy of walking along a veranda when we're truly present to the experience. So he does not give up the pleasure of the Dharma and is not infatuated with that pleasure. It's always a balance. Again, don't grasp onto it and try to make it into something more.

He understands: "When I make determined effort, this particular source of dukkha fades away in me because of that determined effort." And: "When I intimately witness, this particular source of dukkha fades away in me as I cultivate equanimity."

So he gets to what we actually do, and you notice how adaptable the model he's presenting is. First of all, the kind of practice varies depending on one's understanding of dependent arising. Throughout this retreat we've returned again and again to this basic principle of dependent arising. Whatever happens in experience happens because of something else. This arises because something else arose, and this ceases when that ceases.

In the Four Noble Truths, the basic model he presents examines the relationship between craving and dukkha. When craving arises, dukkha arises. When craving ceases, dukkha ceases. So the idea is looking beyond not just the meditation object itself, but beyond it to the network of relationships within which it's embedded.

The experience of practicing is changing. Why is it changing? Something is happening that feeds this. So this particular bit of dukkha, this particular unpleasant or painful situation, has a source, a cause, a condition. The word the Buddha uses here is nidana, which we've referred to before when discussing the sweet essence. It's part of the basic language of dependent arising. As soon as someone hears this word, they know he's talking about dependent arising—the whole web of interrelationships.

Notice he's saying "this particular source of dukkha." He assumes we're paying close attention to experience, that we can distinguish this particular source of dukkha from that one. So there's a sensitivity, a refinement assumed in the practice. It's assumed that we're studying the flow of experience, interested in how one thing leads to another. Different situations require different responses.

This is the key point: it's not one-size-fits-all. It's not just "make more effort," nor is it just "make less effort." Sometimes you find fashions in meditation practice. The Burmese emphasize the "make more effort" model. When teachers came out of Burma and started teaching in the West, they tended toward making more effort. Then, when they noticed students tying themselves in knots, they said, "Well, maybe not." Then other forms of meditation practice emerged, very consciously saying, "Don't make more effort. Don't make too much effort at all. In fact, don't make any effort. Just sit there. Whatever happens is meditation, so don't worry about it. Just let the mind cruise along. You just be there for it. Don't make effort."

So you get shifts from one fashion to another. But what we see in the early teachings is that it's never one-size-fits-all. Sometimes, yes, more effort. Sometimes, definitely less effort. It's a question of being able

to discern which is appropriate. This requires skill from the meditator.

The two forms of practice the Buddha describes are: first, determined effort. This is very familiar—this is the Burmese way. This involves directed attention, deliberately directing attention to something, possibly aimed at directly challenging a problem.

A problem has arisen, bang—just go for it. So for example, the mind is dull. I practice in such a way as to stimulate energy. The mind is dull, so I put more effort into directly confronting that dull state of mind. How do I know the mind is dull? What are the symptoms? Oh, well, there's heaviness. Is the heaviness in the mind, or is it in the body, or is it both? Pay attention. Really look at it. Go straight into the center of it. This is applying determined effort aimed directly at the problem.

Or the mind is restless. So I practice in such a way as to deliberately calm the flow of energy. Deliberately bring it down. I'm doing something to address this. In either case, I directly confront the situation and I do something about it, but it's something aimed at this particular situation. It's precisely aimed. And to accomplish this, I need what we talked about early in the retreat: sati sampajañña, mindfulness and clear understanding. We talked about it as mindfulness being essentially presence, and clear understanding being the intelligence associated with that presence. So intelligent presence. We're bringing our intelligence to the project.

So sometimes determined effort. And sometimes intimate witnessing. When I make a determined effort, this particular source of dukkha fades away in me because of that determined effort. And when I intimately witness, this particular source of dukkha fades away in me as I cultivate equanimity.

Now this intimate witnessing is a compound verb based on the verb upekkhati, which is a verb we do not have in English, as far as I'm aware. It's "to equanimize." You know the noun equanimity. This is the verb "to equanimity." I don't think we have a verb for equanimity, do we? "Equanimize" is pretty good, though that's my invention. It's like two words, like "with equanimity"—doing something with equanimity added on, but "to equanimize" itself. It's a verb in Pali and Sanskrit. And again, it's an activity.

It's interesting that when you look at the basic terms that the Buddha uses, their nouns, they're all based on verbs. They're activities. This is typical of the Buddha's dynamic approach. A thing is its activity. Its identity is what it does.

Anyway, this verb, which we've already mentioned actually, comes from the root īkṣ, "to see." So this is seeing, and you get the prefix upa, which denotes nearness or close touch. So seeing. Now seeing implies a direct, present engagement, but it also implies distance. If I'm seeing something, I'm separate from it. And then you add upa, which denotes nearness or close touch, so I'm seeing it, but from very, very close by.

So this intimate witnessing—very, very close, but there's a detachment, so I'm not getting caught up in it. I'm separated out from it, but I'm very, very close to it. Have you ever had that kind of experience when you meditate? It's like really, really, really close, but it's not like boom, you're in it. You haven't fallen,

haven't entangled yourself in it.

There's that sense of separation, but very close by. And this is equanimising. This is *upekkhatī*. So intimate witnessing. Bhikkhu Bodhi translates it as "looks on with equanimity."

In this state, there's no attempt to influence anything. They're not doing anything with the experience, just staying really, really close to it. Mindfulness becomes strong, it becomes continuous. Remember when we talked about the chorus in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta—the Buddha was talking about *sati*, mindfulness, and then he talks about *paṭisati*. The *paṭi* denotes continuity and depth. So when the mindfulness becomes strong, clear, continuous, equanimity develops. And the mind comes into its own natural balance. The *citt a* comes into harmony.

When the mind changes and it comes into harmony, then the object known by the mind changes. And again this is dependent arising. Change the mind which is experiencing something and the something changes. Change the something and the mind that knows it changes.

So this is a more hands-off approach than determined effort. This is not trying to do anything with it at all. It's just staying intimately present to it. And the Buddha says, "When I intimately witness this particular source of *dukkha*"—and again it's particular, it works with this source of pain, not with that one, but this one—"this particular source of *dukkha* fades away in me as I cultivate equanimity, as I develop equanimity."

The suttas are very compact, so you don't usually get much in the way of examples. When it comes down to it, for me, right effort is essentially a matter of choice. You could say that presence is a chosen intimacy with whatever is happening now. It's just what's happening now. It's got nothing to do with past or future. It's just now. And staying present to it, but that presence requires a choice.

This choice is unusual because, as we started off by saying, our obsessions are habitual. So we keep making the choice to pursue our obsessions, and we do it out of sheer habit, apart from anything else. Because we've been doing this for decades. So it seems hard to make the choice to be present to this now. Essentially it's just a choice.

One sign of wrong effort is when any hint of tension develops in the body, because it's not physical. It's a choice. And if there's any kind of striving towards past or future, then there's too much. There's something extra added to it. It's a choice now.

But the thing about this choice is that it has to be made now. This is something I realized in Burma many years ago. I discovered when I started practicing there—I discovered with some horror that the project was to stay continuously mindful all day. And when I thought about the enormity of this task, I realized I can't. It is absolutely impossible. I could never do this. But then it occurred to me that what I could do was be mindful now. And so it's this relationship to the present which is central to effort. It's not about doing it all day.

It's about doing it now. And this "it" is a choice—the choice now to be present to this which is already happening. It's the relationship between this not-past-and-not-future now, while still tracking the cause and effect of dependent origination. Because it's observable now.

This brings us back to something we touched upon at the very beginning when we talked about mindfulness as remembering the present. In modern dharma discourse, usually when people say "the present," they will add the word "moment"—the present moment. You'll notice I've been careful to avoid this language. The Buddha does not use the word "moment" when he talks about the present.

If you think about it, what is a moment? A moment is a very brief period of time which, if you blink, you'll miss it. It's merely the preliminary to what's going to happen next. We can think about the present as a moment partly because of our rushed relationship to time normally. For us, the present is rather like a transit lounge in a major airport—we land, restlessly hang out, and then dash off somewhere else. We're always going somewhere.

But this understanding has a lot to do with our technology. We can measure time in ways that in the time of the Buddha they couldn't even conceive of. They had a very different relationship to time. For them, I think, the present was not a moment—it was a space.

Remember at the very beginning of the retreat I suggested the meditation experiment: see if you can find the border between this present moment and the future. See if you can find the point where the present becomes the future. Because if it's a moment, a moment is very small and has very clear boundaries. So can you find the border where the present becomes the future? Can you find the border where the past becomes the present?

No. All we've got is the present. That's all we have.

So even when I'm tracking cause and effect relationships which are linear over time, when I'm tracking them they're all in the present. It's a big present. But it's present because it's what is being seen, heard, smelt, tasted, touched, or minded now. It's the nowness which is crucial. And the nowness is not some tiny little moment.

What gets in the way of this practice is not distraction. Distraction is not the enemy of this practice—it's the content of the practice. What gets in the way is habit. Because when we get lost in habit, we go unconscious, we sleepwalk. And that is the opposite of mindfulness.

If you look at habit—the habit that gets in the way of our practice—how does it present itself to us? It presents as a choice made now, but unknowingly. I make the choice to drop into this thought stream, but I don't know that I've made the choice. I wake up to it later.

The practice presents as a choice made now, but knowingly. That's the difference. It's knowing that choice. But the effort, the work, is always to remain present to this now—not to get caught up in past and future.

Any questions or comments?

"You mentioned you know right effort when you do wrong effort. Do you think that's true of a lot of the right view, right intention, right speech, etc.?"

I think that's the way we learn things. It's like we learn by doing and we make lots of mistakes. So making mistakes is very important, if not essential. But of course, we get a feel for it at some point.

So we develop a feel for right effort, and again it has much to do with our relationship to time—when past and future are either not there at all or simply not pulling at us. They might remain in the background, but they're not exerting their usual gravitational force. There's a sense of flow and ease, an absence of strain, yet with clarity intact.

You can cultivate a taste for this quality. You can learn to recognize it. And in that recognition, there's pleasure—the pleasure associated with Dharma practice. Once you develop a sense of this pleasure, the mind will naturally incline toward returning there. It's like discovering a beautiful garden; you want to visit again and again.

Whereas when practice is strained and forced, the mind naturally resists returning. It has to be flogged back into that state, which creates aversion rather than attraction. The wise path cultivates the conditions that make the mind want to return to wholesome states, not because it's forced to, but because it recognizes the genuine satisfaction found there.

Thank you very much for listening.

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