Wise Effort

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 44:04

The end of the first day. This can be an interesting point in the retreat—sometimes a time of self-judgment or dissatisfaction that things haven't panned out quite how you were anticipating before you started. Maybe some doubt or confusion about this very open structure and very structureless technique that was presented this morning.

So if any of those kinds of doubts have been your experience today, then a couple of suggestions for anyone who's newer to meditation. I think some sound advice is that if you're trying something and it's not working, try something else. As most of us in this room probably already know, meditation is very much a trial and error process. So if you've been sitting, try walking. If you've been walking, find a place to be still. If you've been focusing hard with eyes closed, go and sit on the veranda, and so on. It's never wasted to try something different because every time we learn a little more about what works in particular conditions.

My other suggestion is that if you are attuned to what's going on in the heart and mind, then take note of this as we're going through these early days of the retreat. So if there's frustration or dissatisfaction arising, can we make that the meditation object? What does frustration feel like? How is it experienced in the body? What are the physical sensations, the energetic quality? Tuning in to these subtleties of the heart and mind.

What I want to do tonight is challenge some of your assumptions about meditation. I want to start with a question: Do you think you're a good meditator? You don't have to answer out loud or publicly. But our answer to this question can reveal some of our assumptions about meditation—assumptions that we're often unaware we even hold.

For example, if I ask you now, what does good meditation look like? What comes to mind? Is it someone sitting in the cross-legged posture, nice straight back, blissful, serene expression on their face? What if I ask, what does good meditation feel like? Is it something tranquil, peaceful, thought-free, blissful?

I want to outline two problems with these very common ideals about good meditation.

The first problem with these ideals is that they set up a dichotomy between meditation and the rest of our lives. We assume that meditation is this special spiritual practice that takes place in special conditions. And yet I often hear meditators say that they're frustrated or disillusioned because when they face difficult situations in their lives, they're not necessarily able to apply the tranquility and equanimity and insights that they've gained on the meditation cushion in the midst of those challenging moments, and

stop themselves from reacting in painful ways.

This may be something that resonates for you. But if you think about it, it's not that surprising. If we have spent years or even decades cultivating serenity and equanimity on the cushion with our eyes closed, then it's unlikely to be available when we're arguing with our partner or rushing to meet a deadline at work. Like anything in life, we get good at what we practice. If we practice mindfulness on the cushion, then that's what we get good at. If we practice mindfulness while arguing or mindfulness while rushing, we can get good at those things too. With practice, we can be mindful during any activity, including relating to others, but only if we recognize it and prioritize it as legitimate practice. Because it takes effort and it takes skill.

This is what the Tibetans call adding wood to the fire. It's the idea of taking the meditation practice outside of the retreat container, off the meditation cushion, to meet the challenges of life and see if we can stay centered in their midst—see if we can still maintain our practice when the fire is blazing. Not just nurturing a tiny safe flame of awareness under retreat conditions, a little candle wisp of a flame that will blow out with any sudden gust of emotion, but deliberately stoking the flames with the fuel of life's challenges so that awareness radiates out into our life like a fire consuming the darkness.

But instead, what happens is that mindfulness in daily activities tends to be treated like a nice little added extra. It's like the complementary side dish to the main meal of sitting. We don't really take it seriously or invest our effort in it. It doesn't meet our ideal about good meditation. This is a hugely wasted opportunity, and it's based on our misunderstanding about the purpose of meditation.

We often assume that meditation is about achieving a state of calm, ideally thought-free and blissful. But vipassanā meditation is about developing wholesome mental qualities, insight and wisdom. It's about seeing and understanding the nature of reality. This is what ultimately frees the heart from suffering, not temporary states of calm. When we define it like this—seeing and understanding the nature of reality—then it's apparent that these qualities of mind can be developed in any posture, during any activity.

Absolutely anything we experience can be an opportunity to develop wholesome states and wisdom. Sleepiness, restlessness, frustration, grief, self-judgment—all these things that show up in our meditation practice that we tend to push away because we judge them to be the wrong kind of experience. With this approach, we welcome them all in because they're all fertile conditions for cultivating understanding and wisdom.

So we welcome the chaos, we welcome the messiness, but also the joys, the elation, and the mundane moments. We use them as grounds for the practice. No opportunity to develop wisdom is wasted.

That's the first reason to challenge our ideals about meditation: to dissolve the dichotomy between meditation and everyday life, so that all the times we react unskillfully, all the times we perpetuate

painful habits—all those really juicy moments in our life where we have the most to learn—are not wasted, but instead become the foundation of the practice, the foundation for developing wisdom.

The second problem with holding on to unrealistic ideals about good meditation is that our practice can become strained and goal-oriented. When we hold an ideal about what good meditation looks like or feels like, we tend to judge ourselves by whether we can attain it. We try to emulate the serene meditator sitting in the cross-legged upright posture, and tension and strain can creep into our practice.

This may be something you recognize in yourself. Do you judge yourself harshly as a poor meditator? This alone is an indication that the effort factor is likely out of balance. But there are subtler signs as well. Who has ever felt relief when the bell rings at the end of a meditation session? Or how about this: have you ever set up a beautiful, serene little corner in your house with a nice meditation cushion, maybe a statue of the Buddha or some flowers, with a very strong intention that you're going to spend some time there every day, and then over time found that it's actually getting harder and harder to make it onto that cushion? Both of these are examples that the effort factor is out of balance, that there is some strain in the practice which makes meditation feel like work we need to take a break from. Hence I like to say that the most common daily practice by meditators is guilt about not practicing at all.

This tendency to strain was recognized by the Buddha among his own students. Some of you may be familiar with the Sona Sutta, where the monk Sona is practicing so ardently, so diligently, walking back and forth in walking meditation, putting so much effort into the practice that the soles of his feet are cracked and bleeding. But nonetheless, despite his ardency, he is still feeling very frustrated by his lack of progress on the path—so frustrated that he's considering disrobing.

So the Buddha comes to have a chat with him. The Buddha makes reference to the fact that Sona, before he joined the community, was a musician who played an ancient Indian musical instrument called a veena, a string instrument. The Buddha says to him, "Sona, you used to be a veena player, didn't you? So you know about playing the veena. How was it to try to play the veena if the strings were strung too tight?"

Sona says, "Well, no, it's no good. You can't play it if the strings are too tight."

And the Buddha says, "And what about if the strings are too loose?"

"Well, no, of course you can't play it if the strings are too loose. You need the strings to be just right, neither too taut nor too slack."

And the Buddha says, "Yes, and it's exactly the same with meditation."

The Buddha is basically telling Sona that he's trying too hard. He's like a lute that's strung too tight. If we're trying too hard to be a good meditator, then we're not applying what the Buddha calls wise effort, and we are in fact just reinforcing our sense of self. Because *I'm* the one who's the hopeless meditator. *I'm*

the one who just needs to try a bit harder, sit up a bit straighter, sit a bit longer, get a bit more samādhi.

Without realizing it, we tightly control our practice, not recognizing that this in itself is an act of selfing. Our practice becomes yet another project of the self, something we want to achieve in, something we want to master. There's nothing surprising about this because this is our habitual way of engaging in activities in our life. But it does mean that we may practice for years or even decades, paradoxically clinging to our goal of letting go.

So this is the second reason to challenge our ideas about meditation: to ensure that we don't get entangled in a relationship of strain and striving in our practice, and that we don't use it to solidify our sense of self.

How can we practice in a way that is both relaxed and dissolves the separation between meditation and everyday life, and yet still has the strength and depth to develop insight and wisdom? That's what this natural awareness approach aims to do, by offering an approach to meditation as a way of life, a way of being, seamlessly interwoven into everyday life.

I'll be introducing successive instructions on natural awareness over the course of the retreat, but tonight I want to emphasize two aspects of this approach that relate to these two problems I've just outlined.

The first aspect of the natural awareness approach—and this relates to the problem of separation between meditation and everyday life—is that this approach doesn't privilege the sitting posture. This actually sounds more revolutionary than it is. The Buddha in fact teaches four postures for insight meditation: sitting, standing, lying, and movement.

And it's no coincidence that these four postures encompass all human activities.

In fact, if you look carefully at the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the seminal instruction for vipassanā meditation given by the Buddha, he opens with an overview of the practice, and then the structure of the sutta is that he gives thirteen specific meditation exercises—ways to cultivate mindfulness for insight. Each recommendation, each exercise is separated by a refrain that's repeated, a bit like the chorus of a song. And then there's a conclusion. So twenty-eight sections to the sutta in all, presenting these thirteen different exercises for cultivating mindfulness.

Can you guess how often in those twenty-eight verses he recommends a sitting posture in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta? One—for the specific exercise of tracking the breathing. But for tracking postures, activities, anatomical parts, elements, the decomposing body, feelings, mind, hindrances, aggregates, sense spheres, awakening factors, and noble truths, he doesn't specify a posture. What he repeats again and again is that a practitioner should *live* or *abide* tracking these aspects of experience. Meditation as a way of being.

So natural awareness is done in any posture, and this is what makes it so adaptable to everyday life. It allows us to cultivate mindfulness in any activity, not just in formal postures that are separate from our everyday lives. It does take a lot of deconditioning to take this aspect of natural awareness seriously,

because we are so programmed to think that serious meditation happens in a seated posture on the meditation cushion.

But what is the point of only practicing sitting meditation if we never practice speaking and listening meditation, for example, or seeing meditation? We're often in the habit of closing our eyes when we practice, but all the rest of the time that we're engaging in activities—when we're conscious at least—we have our eyes open. So how can all the activities that we do with our eyes open be used as a basis for developing wisdom if we have to first close our eyes in order to collect our mindfulness?

People often ask, particularly towards the end of a retreat when we're in that transition phase thinking about moving back into our everyday lives—a very common question is how can we possibly maintain mindfulness while we're interacting with a screen, doing our work on the computer or watching our device. It's like people don't seem to believe it's possible to be aware while you're on a screen. But awareness is always available, and we get good at what we practice. So if we practice awareness of seeing, this is really helpful for activities where the predominant sense is seeing, such as using screens.

So that's the first aspect I wanted to mention tonight: the equality of all postures in this approach.

The second aspect, which relates to the tendency to be strained and goal-oriented in our approach to meditation, is the importance of right effort or wise effort—sammā vāyāma.

Wise effort is a central focus in this approach because the thing about straining and striving is that it's very slippery and easy to miss. Most of the time we don't notice it because we're so caught up in our meditation object, so focused on it, that we fail to notice the quality of the heart and mind that is aware of the object. It's easy to be oblivious to the fact that we're actually straining, and that this effort is winding us tighter and tighter instead of allowing the self to unravel.

In this approach, we put an emphasis on cultivating wise effort right from the start of the retreat. Having a balanced, relaxed, light-touch approach to our practice is what enables us to develop sustained momentum in mindfulness. The effort comes from the intention to maintain continuous awareness throughout all of our activities, but the effort required in each moment is quite minimal—such as just the effort required to know that I'm seeing. What we're working towards is continuity through our waking moments. And if we meditate with a mind that's strained, resistant, or disengaged, we won't be able to maintain that continuity. We'll find ourselves crashing and burning after intense sitting periods and unable to maintain awareness during times of transition.

I want to focus a little on this concept of wise effort, sammā vāyāma, and offer a few different ways to think about it and apply it in practice, in the hope that one or another of these will resonate for you and give you something to play with.

One way we can think about wise effort is as a relaxed body. Body and mind are energetically interwoven, so if we're practicing with tension in the body, we can be sure there will also be tension in the mind. This

will lead to unbalanced effort. This is actually something the Bodhisattva Gautama had to learn for himself when he was striving for awakening. Many of us will be familiar with his story, but at one point before he became the Buddha, he was convinced that the path to liberation lay with conquering the material body and mastery over physical pain. At that time he took himself off to the forest and undertook the most extreme ascetic practices you can imagine.

When he's reflecting on this later and teaching his students, he describes what he was thinking—his rationale, his attitude to practice at that earlier time. He describes it like this: "It occurred to me: Why don't I, with teeth clenched and tongue pressed against the roof of my mouth, squeeze, squash, and scorch mind with mind? So that's what I did, until sweat ran from my armpits. It was like when a strong man grabs a weaker man by the head or throat or shoulder and squeezes, squashes, and crushes them. In the same way, with teeth clenched and tongue pressed against the roof of my mouth, I squeezed, squashed, and crushed mind with mind until sweat ran from my armpits."

My energy was roused up and unflagging, and my mindfulness was established and lucid. But my body was disturbed, not tranquil, because I'd pushed too hard with that painful striving.

So what do you think? Is that a good description of right effort? Anyone have a go at that at some point today? I can't see too many sweat stains.

No, of course, this is not wise effort. And in fact, this extreme dedication to these ascetic practices nearly kills him. It takes him to the brink of starvation. And just in time, he realizes the mistake in his approach. He eats some food, and he finds a good place to sit and meditate at the foot of a huge old Bodhi tree.

Again, when he's reflecting back on this time later to his students, he describes his state at that moment, sitting under the Bodhi tree, like this: "My energy was roused up and unflagging. My mindfulness was established and lucid. My body was tranquil and undisturbed. And my mind was immersed in samādhi."

So he'd learned the lesson about the importance of wise effort. The difference between the two descriptions is that in the first instance, his body was disturbed by his painful striving, while in the second, his body was tranquil and undisturbed. In both descriptions, he had unflagging energy and lucid mindfulness, but these couldn't support the development of samādhi and wisdom until the body was relaxed.

And now here we are, two and a half thousand years on, in this beautiful meditation center. We've got so many comforts for our bodies compared to the Buddha, who wore a robe made of rags and went to practice in the forest, sitting on the bare ground at the foot of a tree, exposed to the elements, to wild animals, to bandits, to insects, relying on alms for food. And yet, despite the relative comfort in our circumstances, how often do we find ourselves practicing with a body that's disturbed and not tranquil? How often do we push through signs of tension in the body?

If we take the example of the Buddha's own path, this is not the way to cultivate wise effort. So that's one

way of thinking about wise effort: wise effort as relaxed body.

Another perspective I want to offer is that wise effort is driven by curiosity and not by craving, aversion, and delusion. When we engage our curiosity in the practice, this generates an effortless energy. When we're curious, we actually don't have to try. We don't have to pump energy into the practice. Instead, the curiosity pulls us along and creates a momentum of its own.

Say, for example, it's the early days of the retreat, maybe the evening of the first day. I'm feeling a bit dejected because I can't yet see the fruits of my labor. I'm not really sure that my mindfulness is getting stronger. And if I'm honest about it, my mind just feels quite tired and dull. This feels dissatisfactory—not the meditation experience I came to the retreat for. It's obvious that the energy factor is out of balance; there's not enough energy in the system.

In this situation, there are two ways of generating more energy. The first is driven by aversion to the tiredness and dullness: to pump more energy into the system, to really focus hard, to be determined to sit through it. The second is to get curious about the experience of tiredness and dullness. What is that experience? What does it feel like? If we can hook our curiosity onto that experience, then before we know it, the energy is naturally amping up because it's actually quite interesting.

Have you ever had that experience of watching your mind falling asleep, but the watching part is quite alert and fascinated by this? I had a really clear example of this. I had an opportunity to do a retreat last year. I don't get many opportunities to do retreat at the moment, but I did one at Jhāna Grove in Western Australia—beautiful natural surroundings, lots of paths to walk, beautiful eucalypts, and all the big gum nuts they have there.

I was just wandering around on the paths in the first couple of days, very relaxed approach, letting mindfulness collect and settle. And then after—I don't know, maybe on about day two—I got to this point where I started thinking about the meditation hall. I think I should go and have a good sit in the meditation hall.

I found this curious because I was outside under a gum tree, and I prefer to practice outdoors. The meditation hall there is almost bunker-like—a very indoor sort of environment. So I was curious about why this sudden thought arose that I should head to the meditation hall for a good concentrated sit.

And I realized that the mind was bored. It was only about day two, and not much was happening in the practice. So the mind was bored. I thought, "Oh, that's interesting. I won't go and have that concentrated sit. I'll just go and sit on my bed in my room—a very unstimulating environment—and I'll see what happens with the boredom."

So I went and sat on my bed, and it was the first time in years that I'd really sat with the experience of boredom. It was fascinating. It was so painful. We think of boredom as being kind of bland, a bit dull. But to actually sit with it and not run away from it—I found it excruciating. But it piqued my interest, my

curiosity. So I sat there with it, sat there with it, and eventually the lunch bell went or whatever. I emerged from my room, and the energy had been roused, the concentration had been sharpened, and my curiosity was engaged with the practice. I'd achieved what I was wanting to achieve, but drawn by curiosity rather than out of a sense of dissatisfaction about what was going on in my practice.

The final approach to wise effort that I'd like to offer tonight is wise effort as surrender.

The beautiful thing about this practice is that it allows you to be as you actually are. It gives you permission to be fully yourself, to bring every part of ourselves and our experience to the meditation. You're tired, you're restless, you're agitated, you're emotional, you're wound up—so what? No problem. The meditation practice is simply to know this, simply to be aware of what's happening now. No preference for what we're aware of. It doesn't matter. The trembling heart, the doubt, the insecurities, the anxieties—there's plenty of space in the practice for all of this. It's all the basis for cultivating mindfulness and wisdom.

This practice is one place, one activity, where we don't have to be anything other than who we really are. We just show up with all our messiness. Surrendering is this attitude of no preference for whatever shows up in the meditation. I think I quoted Chögyam Trungpa this morning: chaos is good news. When we surrender to whatever is arising, then we genuinely welcome chaos into the practice. And it leads to a balanced effort because we're not using unnecessary energy trying to push away some experiences, trying to grasp onto other experiences, trying to manipulate the meditation experience.

So wise effort as relaxed body, wise effort driven by curiosity, wise effort as surrender—making this sum of wise effort a central focus right from the start sets us up to have a balanced energy in the practice.

Are there any questions at this point?

"First of all, I would like to say thank you for the very generous sharing. It's very interesting, and I appreciate it so much. You mentioned last night that somebody asked about the difference between paying attention and awareness, and you explained it well. Just now you also mentioned mindfulness and awareness. How do we really differentiate those?"

Awareness and mindfulness—I think I mentioned this. One of my teachers, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, uses the word awareness in the same way that we are most familiar with mindfulness. So I do tend to use them interchangeably. We could say that mindfulness is a continuity of awareness over time. Awareness is knowing what is happening now, and mindfulness is having that continuity over time. We're cultivating that remembering so that it develops into a momentum. But I have to say that I am probably a little looser with how I use the terms, and I often just use the two interchangeably because I have

two main traditions in my training. One is the Mahasi tradition, where we're more familiar with the term mindfulness, and the other is Sayadaw Utejaniya, who uses the term awareness. So when I'm talking about awareness, I'm usually just meaning mindfulness. Both of them are remembering in the present,

and they're remembering what is present.

They're both translations of the Pali word *sati*, which is usually translated as mindfulness. *Sati* literally means memory. And what we are remembering—so it's an act of remembering—is we're remembering the present. Like when I was talking this morning about the distinction between remembering what's going on now while I'm undertaking an activity, versus undertaking the activity—hanging out the washing—and not remembering what's going on now. I can be completely checked out, inside some sort of thought narrative in my mind. So the act of remembering is important to mindfulness or awareness. Watching your mind falling asleep—this is the act of mindfulness or awareness. I'm using them interchangeably, mindfulness and awareness, both translations of the word *sati*. That act of watching the mind falling asleep, or watching the mind being bored, or watching the mind being dull—that's the quality of remembering to be aware of the experience that's unfolding now, whatever that experience is.

The question of letting go of goals—that's the place where I have to think a little deeper. It's so habitual to have this relationship of clinging. So we come to meditation and we still have this same relationship of clinging to a goal. But if you don't have a goal when you come to meditation, if you don't come here wanting to improve, to be a better person, a happier person—then you won't come at all.

That's the paradox. We do have a goal. In fact, I think I'll be talking about this in another dharma talk in a few nights' time. We have a goal, and yet paradoxically, the only way to achieve that goal is if we can let go of the clinging to it. This is the core of the Buddha's teaching. It's the relationship of clinging that is the problem.

Who has the goal? Indeed.

I have a few more words to offer, then—a few practical suggestions about steadying the heart and finding a balanced and sustainable practice as we ease into the retreat.

In the absence of a retreat structure, you may find yourself imposing a structure on your own day. I think we mentioned that last night when we introduced the open schedule. There's nothing wrong with that if it's helpful for you, particularly if it helps you to settle in during the early part of the retreat. Some people need structure. Some people work better with structure. So a perfectly valid response to a lack of structure is to create one for yourself.

But I would like to offer a few words of caution about your motivations in sticking to your own schedule. It's worthwhile to investigate or to ask yourself: are you doing it out of a sense of confidence that it is developing the momentum in your mindfulness and developing the steadiness in your mind? Or is it contributing to unwise effort? Are there subconscious fears that if you don't follow a schedule, you will have failed, or you're not trying hard enough?

And similarly, what's your relationship to the meditation hall? Sometimes sitting in the meditation hall is an expression of wise effort. It provides a container for practice, it provides a community to practice with,

and these are both invaluable supports—particularly when the internal energy is low, or when the energy is balanced and the practice is flowing smoothly. Then the hall provides a really quiet and contained, conducive environment to support the practice going deeper.

But sometimes sitting in the hall is an expression of unwise effort. Sometimes the reason we go to the hall is because of our craving to be a good yogi. Sometimes we head to the hall to escape from self-doubt or self-judgment or a fear that we're failing or wasting our time—which are deeply unpleasant experiences to be with.

Or we feel a social pressure to turn up—you know that niggling worry that everyone else will notice that you're only in the hall for half the amount of time that they all are. And it's inevitable that wherever you've positioned yourself in the hall, there will be someone in your immediate vicinity who is always sitting still and silent when you arrive and manages to out-sit you every time.

I don't know if you've ever had the experience of entering the hall and determining that your sitting session will last until you have out-sat your neighbour who arrived before you. I certainly have, many times in my early meditation experience.

So it's important to notice whether we're practising with wise effort. I'm not saying don't go to the hall. I'm just saying that you don't have to go to the hall to be a good yogi, and that sometimes it's a more skillful choice not to go.

When you find yourself wanting to come to the hall, I encourage you to look at what is driving that impulse. Am I going to sit because I'm chasing something? Am I after some tranquility, some bliss, some confirmation that I'm a worthy meditator? Is showing up in the hall an expression of wise effort? Or do I need to be adopting a different posture or a different activity that will better support my connection to the unfolding present experience right now?

What matters is that we're cultivating awareness. And to do that, we need to find a balanced effort and a steady heart. It doesn't matter what that looks like from the outside, or where we do that. Find what supports you to nurture your connection to the present moment and to nurture the continuity of your awareness through your waking moments.

Thank you.

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