

Viriya (1 of 5): Initiating Effort

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on March 23, 2020

Good morning again to those who are sitting, and good morning for the first time to those who may be joining us now. Last week, next week, and for the next three weeks, the theme is the Five Faculties, or the Five *Indriyas*. Last week I talked about the first: faith. This week I will talk about the second: effort.

I want to say something about the word, *indriya*, 'faculties.' Sometimes in English they are called the Five Spiritual Faculties. Occasionally, I have seen it translated as the Five Controlling Faculties. The name for these five qualities comes from the name of the Indian god, Indra. *Indriya* means something like, "of the god, Indra."

In the time of the Buddha, Indra was the ruler of the gods. He was considered to be a friend of human beings, a friend of the Buddha. To some degree, this ruler of the gods had dominion over them, controlled them and the celestial world. To associate these five faculties – qualities, capacities, abilities – with the great god, Indra, ruler of the gods, gives them a high regard.

It may be appropriate to translate them in English as the Five Divine Faculties. What I like about this language of divine faculties is the great respect it offers to something that is found within each of us. Our human ability to engage in and be present for these qualities is somehow special, celebrated, and valued. We find these faculties within ourselves as treasures, which are considered to be divine. These divine abilities, which we already have, can be our friend for almost anything we do. They have a supportive quality of helping things to unfold and supporting our activities.

Our Five Divine Faculties are:

1. to have faith and confidence in what we do
2. to make effort
3. to be attentive or mindful in our activity
4. to be focused, steady and concentrated as we do something
5. to be wise or discerning.

The faculty for this week is effort, *virīya*. Effort is a very important quality of practice. One way to understand the course of Buddhist practice is that it is a process of continually finding right effort. What is the right effort? How we make right effort changes from day to day, hour to hour, and sometimes minute to minute. Being attuned to that, and knowing how to flow and move in and out of the effort needed is part of the art of practice.

Some people hear the word 'effort,' and are immediately reactive – as if it is a burden. Effort has associations with hard work, needing to prove oneself, or to do or be something different than being who we are. But hopefully, as people develop in the practice, the idea of effort becomes a delight – second nature, easy, something we are well attuned to and understand. And we appreciate it as something divine, something we have, which is valuable.

How effort manifests changes in the course of time and practice. During this week, I will talk about five different qualities of effort. For today, the first form of effort is *initiating effort* – the effort it takes to initiate and begin doing Buddhist practice, to begin doing meditation. Without some effort, we won't sit down to meditate. Without some effort, we won't go on a retreat. Without some effort, we won't bring up the mindfulness to pay attention to what's going on. There must be some initiating effort.

Sometimes initiating effort is easy. We have tremendous inspiration, and are really excited about the opportunities to sit and meditate. We have energy for this, and are engaged and wholeheartedly involved. We feel lucky that we can do this. Other times, it is really hard. There can be a lot of inertia, resistance, fear, laziness – a momentum to do anything but sit quietly and meditate.

Sometimes it takes a lot of effort – maybe like manual labor – just to sit down, do nothing, and be quiet. To do it regularly takes effort. To get up in the morning and decide to sit, to be mindful throughout the day, when so much else is compelling and wanting attention, takes effort. But to initiate effort – to say, "This is what I am going

to do; I am going to try this and engage in it” is something we do over and over again.

We see this clearly in meditation, especially when people are relatively new to it, or the mind is agitated from a busy day. A lot of mediation is just starting over – initiating effort again, and again, and again. The mind wanders off; we come back. The mind wanders off, and we start again.

I like the language of starting again because every time we start is its own wonderful thing. If we have the idea that we are trying to *maintain* continuity, and then feel discouraged when the mind goes off, that becomes a burden for meditation. But whenever we notice that the mind has wandered off in thought and we are no longer mindful, we can have a very open, generous idea that we are going to sit now as if it's the very first time. We don't have to carry with us the burden of what has just happened. We are allowed to start afresh, as if this is the newest thing we are doing.

In a session of meditation, it might be that starting again is done a hundred times. That's not wrong. It's not a mistake. A tremendous amount of good comes from all those little moments of starting over, of initiating the effort to show up and be present again. Every moment of doing that is redirecting, reconditioning, and retraining the mind. It is letting go and weakening the forces of distraction and preoccupation that have been strengthened over a lifetime of uncontrolled engagement in them.

It's actually a powerful thing to stop or step away from the habitual, compulsive way the mind operates – to just be present. To be here with the present moment, with what's going on, with what is obvious. Just that is great. If you can sustain that over time, great. But don't underestimate the power of this initiating effort.

Sometimes, it feels like meditation is just manual labor. When I am sleepy, or the mind is busy and distractible, it's hard to be present. I have to keep coming back, keep coming back, start again, and start again. Depending on the circumstances in our life, it might be a lot of effort to start again, to keep showing up, to keep letting go.

Initiating effort, the effort it takes to get to the cushion or to go on a retreat requires a lot of organizing. Get tickets, go on a bus – whatever it takes to get there. Some of that effort to get to the cushion is part of the practice itself, especially if you give care and attention to how you sit down to meditate.

Hopefully, you don't do it as a burden. Maybe you make your meditation something beautiful. In the few minutes before you meditate, you don't rush to finish everything you possibly can so that you meditate from being out of breath. Perhaps the meditation can begin five minutes before you sit down. Just as you begin to settle things around your home, be a little calmer in your activity so that when you come to sit, the effort to slow down and be calm and present makes it easier to sit. And the effort to sit is more harmonious.

A lot of effort is in initiating effort. Eventually, we don't have to initiate so much. Eventually, we start being in the flow of effort, and we're able to sustain it. We are able to stay awake more continuously in our experience. As we begin to stay more fully in our experience, and can maintain that to some degree, then effort begins to take a different shape. Different kinds of efforts are needed.

Then we can ask ourselves a question. The first question I asked my first Zen teacher was: “What is right effort?” Finding our way to right effort when we are able to engage and stay engaged is a really wise question. That question will be the topic for tomorrow.

For now, I want to tell you a story about that first question I asked. I had just been introduced to Zen and to Zen meditation. I was attracted to it. The teacher had just given a Dharma talk and had left the Dharma hall. I walked up to him. I was twenty years old. This was forty-five years ago. I asked him, “What's the right effort for doing Zen meditation?” I don't remember much about why I was asking this question. He gave me what, for some people, would be a wonderful answer. But it wasn't wonderful for me, because I was so new that I didn't know how to understand or make sense of it. I probably just internally shrugged my shoulders and just let it be. It made no impression on me. Still, it was a wonderful answer. I asked, “What's the right effort for doing meditation?” He looked me and said, “Who's making the effort?” That is all he said.

As we go through this week looking at effort, we will look at its different aspects and the nature of right effort. Perhaps there is a way in which the question of who is making the effort can free your effort so that it doesn't carry the burden of self. May you enjoy your effort this week. Thank you.