So with this talk, I start a few talks on the sixth factor of the Eightfold Path, right effort. And as an analogy for this, I'll mention that if you're driving on a multi lane freeway and you see that up ahead on a different lane than you're in, there is some debris or an accident or something. So then it's best to not move into that lane because that could be dangerous. If you're in a lane and you see up ahead in your lane, there is a debris or an accident, then it's wise to get out of that lane and into another lane. Once you're in a good lane, it's useful to stay alert for other possible obstacles along the way. You might have been daydreaming or lost in thought and distracted. And you realize it's really good if I actually drive alert, attentive, mindful. And then you are mindful and alert. And then you decide you know, I should stay this way as I'm driving. There might be other dangers up ahead.

So, four different ways of driving. One is to avoid putting oneself in danger. If one is in kind of danger, get out of danger. If one is not driving well, then drive well; drive alertly and attentively with all the skills you have for driving. If you are driving skillfully and alertly, maintain that, keep doing that. So these would be an expression of what right effort is in the teachings of the Buddha. He said there are four right efforts. And there is the effort of avoiding, avoiding danger; the effort of getting out of danger; the effort of arousing, prompting, evoking beneficial ways of being. And then there's the effort of maintaining those beneficial ways of being. So I use that example of the driving to suggest that this idea of right effort, in a technical explanation for what it means in Buddhism, and maybe I'll read that technical definition. But it's kind of technical and dry and complicated and not very inspiring. And I want to make the point that all of us are constantly practicing right effort. It's just part and parcel of human life. That when something is dangerous, or we're going to hurt ourselves, we try to avoid it. Pretty common in many small ways in our daily life. And we try to stay out of trouble. We try to when there's something good going on for us, we try to maintain it. Or we arise it, we evoke it - something good, something helpful. And we do that in driving. And if we don't do it, then driving can kind of be much more difficult and dangerous. And what the right effort is, varies depending on the context. How we make effort, how we engage in doing something in our activities. If I'm driving, which I did some years ago, in a massive snowstorm up in the mountains. Right effort took a lot of effort, took a lot of
energy to really drive safely. I had to drive. And it was clearly dangerous with cars around and icy roads. And so right effort there looks very different when the highway is wide open and clear and there's no traffic at all. And it's straight passage. Then the right effort can be much more relaxed and useful.

So part of life is to discern what is right effort. And that applies to meditation as well. What's the right effort for meditation? And some people are very challenged or aversive even to the topic of effort. I was. As I was kind of learning about the Eightfold Path, I kind of really appreciated seven of the eight factors. But this right effort factor was one that I actually kept at a distance. I didn't want to know it, I didn't like the idea. Because my association with the word effort is to strain. Is to make kind of self centered effort to be engaged in trying to fix something or do something in a way that carries with it a lot of ego or a lot of attachments, or clinging, or a lot of strain. It is just work. And what I've come to appreciate, partly through Buddhist practice, time in monasteries, is the joy of effort. The joy of really kind of being present fully for an activity. And it might be a lot of energies put into some activities, but there's play. It's enjoyable, it's great to kind of absorb oneself in something. And effort is no longer something I recoil from. But now the associations I have with effort is really delightful. Like, oh, boy, I get to kind of put myself into something. And without resistance, without holding back, without straining. Just there fully for this activity. I was taught that a little bit when I was in Zen monasteries, maybe represented it when I was in Japan at the monastery. And it was my job sometimes to carry the dinner food to the dinner table. There were parts of rice and things that I had to carry. And I would just pick up the rice, they had two handles and I'd pick it up by one handle and carry it with one hand. And the other monk said no, Gilson, you have to do things with Zen power, Zen no chikara. And what they meant by that was to hold both handles, hold the rice pot in both hands, to really give yourself over to just holding the right spot. And that was the activity of the moment, and give yourself really there and just do that. And at first, I thought that was kind of silly. I mean, why all this extra effort of two hands and not one hand, but I learned that Oh, just really be present for that pot, to really just me and the pot, kind of commune with the pot. It just felt delightful to kind of have that kind of presence. And so I learned that how we make effort is the art of right effort.

And so part of this is that right after it is defined, these four right efforts are defined with a very important Buddhist term. And in Pāli it's kusala and akusala. Kusala is spelled k u s a l a, and akusala has an A in front of that. And it is translated into English as either skillful or as wholesome. Akusala is unskillful or unwholesome. And it's the common word in ancient Pāli language for a skill. That someone who is a craftsperson develops kusala, develops a skill. Someone who trains animals or train horses or elephants back then, is skilled in the training. A Buddhist practitioner develops the skills of practice. But sometimes the word kusala seems to have associations with the English word wholesome or healthy or nourishing or helpful. And it even has associations with the English word ethical, what is ethical. Akusala is what's unethical. There's a range of meanings and so depending on the context, might translate the word differently.
In the context of meditation practice the word often mean skillful because clearly the Buddha relates meditation practice to an activity that's similar to the skill of learning a musical instrument or learning a craft. And part of the association with that is repetition. That a skill is learned through repetition over and over and over again. And this is true for meditation practice. It's best not to be like a little child in the backseat of a car, telling your parents who are driving, are we there yet? Are we there yet? Are we there yet? When you meditate, don't have any concern for being there or getting there. Just be content to just be here with your experience. And just keep practicing and doing the simple practice as if you're holding both handles on the pot. As if it's just you and your breathing. You're there to be with the breath, come back to your breath. You're there to let go of your thoughts and being distracted and caught up in that. And starting again. And starting again. People who meditate regularly will find that slowly over time the body changes, especially if you sit cross legged. But when you sit upright in a chair, that kind of slowly, very, very slowly, the body begins to become more skilled in the meditation posture. It took me seven years when I first started meditating, without really efforting or trying to do it until I was sitting for a while in full lotus. And I kind of developed the kind of a yogic body. But it was repetition day in and day out, that does it in imperceptible changes. And so the same thing with focusing on their breath. We're developing a skill and it's the repetition of coming back, letting go, coming back, letting go and coming back. And we're developing the skill of not clinging and holding on to thoughts, ideas, feelings, emotions. Developing skill of not being reactive. We're developing the skill of beginning again in a simple way, in a relaxed way. To start again with the breathing in a receptive, allowing way without straining or wanting or getting or trying to attain something. Just here with this experience of breathing. Just okay here. With Zen no chikara with Zen power, not forceful macho power, but the power of presence. Being here for this breathing. But through the day of a retreat, for example, or in daily life. This applies to all kinds of circumstances. We develop the skill of really being present for what we're doing while we're doing it. And for those of you who are not in a monastery, probably one of the best tools you have, best practices you have to replicate the benefits of really being on retreat, or enhancing the retreat, or bringing the Dharma into your daily life, is to more often than you are now, give yourself over to just doing one thing at a time. Give yourself just doing that. Just hold both handles of the pot. Just be in the sink washing the dishes. Just sweep your kitchen floor without thinking about plans for the day, or thinking about being upset about how somebody else tracked mug into the floor. Just sweep. So just do one thing. And this idea of just doing one thing when you're doing it, and just being present. And then learning how to do that one thing without strain, without hesitation, without complaining, without being overeager. Just kind of finding, that slowly by doing repetition, finding a delightful, settled, enjoyable, skillful way of doing whatever we're doing. And in doing so, becoming free of rumination. Becoming free of the ruminating mind that's ruminating about all kinds of things in ways that undermine us, that debilitate us. We want to develop a mind which is skillful, that is wholesome, that is helpful. And learning the art of really skillful engagement in the activity, the activity of the moment. Learning how to do that wisely is one of the great, becomes one of the great delights of this practice.
So I'll say more about these four right efforts in the next couple of days. And I hope that you will by the time I finish, you'll appreciate the tremendous value of it. Especially if you were like me when I first started this practice, and learned about the right effort. I just like oh, no, that's not for me or this is going in the wrong direction. I hope that you'll hang in here and find your way through this until you also will feel the joy, discover the joy of effort.

So thank you and I look forward to continuing tomorrow.