

2020-11-17 Eightfold Path-Right Effort (2 of 3)

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SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

So this morning I want to talk a little more about what's known as the four right efforts or the four right endeavors. People would like to know, what should I do with my life? What endeavor, what purpose, should I live my life? And it's one of the great questions. And the Buddha offers in this four right efforts a response to that question. It's not a response that gives something specific, but rather it gives practices, overarching practices with which to endeavor or to which to approach everything we do. And that is to prevent what is unskillful. What is it to use really poor English, to just to make it really simple, is to prevent what's bad. Abandon the bad that has arisen. Evoke what's good. And maintain what's good. So of course, good and bad are a little bit problematic ideas, but it makes it very simple to say it that way. To put a little bit more Buddhist flesh on it, it's to prevent the arising of actions, activities of mind, body, and speech, which cause harm and are unskillful. So, to prevent them from occurring, and to, if they do occur, if we are doing things which are harmful and unskillful, then to let go of them. And then to cultivate, develop, evoke things which are beneficial, and skillful, wholesome. And once they've been evoked, maintain them. Keep it going. So in this way, we become the caretakers of our own heart, caretakers of our inner life. And that's really the purpose of this Buddhist practice. And we get to this six step of the Eightfold Path, we're talking now about how to be a caretaker for our inner life. And we have a beautiful, wonderful potential within us. And every single one of us has it, no doubt that we have beauty inside. But we don't often take time to recognize it, to allow it to evoke it. And sometimes, because we don't take time or are in a hurry, we're reactive, we're caught up in greed, hatred, and delusion, that all too easily unskillful things arise from us. Sometimes those are maintained. They become habits. And we're trying to develop different habits in the Dharma, different default settings from which deliver our lives.

And so these four right efforts is kind of the overarching kind of way to care for this heart for this inner well being. And so it takes mindfulness, it takes some awareness to be able to track what's going on in our minds, what's going on within. And to be able to recognize, in a skillful way, when we are unskillful. And that is really one of the important arts of all this. To be able to recognize things which we do which are not solitary, that are we don't feel good about necessarily, and maybe are unfortunate, that are unskillful. And how in mindfulness, to be aware of that skillfully, to be aware of it so we don't cause more harm. And it's a little bit of a delight to do this. Then when we get the hang of it. Kind of

bittersweet delight maybe or something like that. To be able to feel something about ourselves which is off, something which we feel is avoidable or something that's not quite right or we've caused harm maybe to ourselves or others. And something about ourselves we don't feel good about does this doesn't seem right.

But to be aware of it with kindness, with openness, with non-reactivity, to make space for it, to hold it graciously. So that's how it is. And when I've been around some of the, when I was a newer student and was around the most senior kind of mature Buddhist practitioners that I've met in my life. One of the things that inspired me a lot of about them was that they talked about themselves, sometimes they would be very honest about their inner life that was difficult for them. But what was inspiring was not that they talked about it, but how utterly undefended, relaxed, open, and judgmental they were about their honesty about saying this is what they're working with, this is what's going on for them. That sometimes they get angry, and they were working with the anger and trying to not be angry, but that they just kind of, you know, it wasn't a problem for them. They weren't judging themselves for it, they just kind of, oh, there's anger. And I'm working with it.

So part of Buddhist practice is in fact, an honest assessment of ourselves. Buddhism should not be a kind of recourse to only see ourselves as wonderful and special, and all kind, all good, and all that. And do so become partial. To become whole, we want to see all of what we are – the good, the bad, and the ugly, and the beautiful. And that's where we can find our freedom, that's the movement, that's what's onward leading – very important Buddhist word – onward leading to freedom and greater goodness. And we start by kind almost like training ourselves to see. So we want to look to see, oh, that wasn't so good. When I was in the monastery, a big part of my training then was to look at my anger. And I would sit in meditation many, many hours with anger and just sit there and look at it. And certainly in the beginning, I was reactive to it and discouraged by it, and worse things were happening about my self worth. But over time, I learned just to sit with it. With sadness, and guilt, and anger and fear, and all these things, and just hold it broadly and openly. And not make it a problem. To start feeling whole with these things.

So to see what's going on inside of us, and know that we have a tendency to maybe do things which are unkind, to do things unskillful, and even harmful. And because of that honesty, to then do two things. The first of the two right efforts. First is to find a way to prevent these things from arising. And very simply, it could be something like if you know that you have a problem with candy, you tend to eat a lot of candy and it's not healthy for you and you feel lousy afterwards, then perhaps don't bring candy home. Or don't go down the supermarket aisle where the candy is. And that kind of avoiding going to where you're tempted is a way of preventing something unwholesome from arising. And that sometimes is a very wise thing to do. It could also be wise if you're going someplace that you know it's going to be challenging, someone really makes you angry or makes you afraid or something, is to prepare before you go. And you know that if you're tired and hungry and stressed out, it tends to be very hard when you go there and then your reactivity arises. So you prepare yourself for it. You meditate, you eat well, you're rest well, you maybe go for a walk beforehand. So you arrive in a relatively good space. So you're kind of creating the conditions where you're less likely to have these unskillful states arise.

In the depth of Buddhist practice, what we're looking for eventually, is a kind of equanimity and freedom, where we see how things are rising and passing. We see things coming and going. The constant flow of change. And in becoming sensitive to the flow of change and inconstancy of life. Being relaxed, open, present, then there's a kind of overview or space where we can see, even things which are difficult, arise. And we don't pick it up. It is just we see it as part of the river of life, part of the flow of change. We just see how it comes and it goes. Someone says something to us that's unkind and there's enough presence of mind to just see it as something that arises and go comes. And there's nothing inside the mind that wants to pick it up or nothing that encounters it, it doesn't strike against anything in the mind. It's just those words just go right through. And so to have a presence of mind with equanimity, and clarity of mindfulness, is another way of preventing these unwholesome unskillful states to arise.

And then when they do arise, then the practice is to let go of them. And some people say letting go is hard. Some people don't understand how to let go. The Buddha said that it's actually easier to let go than it is to prevent. There's something about preventing which is maybe harder because it takes a stronger mind, a stronger kind of being grounded in an open whole mindfulness to really, kind of really, be free so these things don't arise. But so letting go is often something we have to do. And there's two kinds of things related to letting go. One is if you're holding on tight to something, to release the grip. And what's so nice about the heartstrings, if we release the grip on the strings, then the strings will start vibrating, again, make nice music. But to release something. So if we're preoccupied with certain thoughts and resentments about someone, you maybe sometimes feel physically where that holding is, and tightening is. In the forehead, and the temples and the jaws or in the chest or somewhere. And to really feel the physicality of contracting around some idea, some feeling, is a real aid to helping to let go because then if we relax the body, then sometimes we can relax the grip we have on the ideas and the thoughts we have.

So to learn to let go. And that's a skill that we develop, the skill of letting go. And we start in small ways, and slowly start building and building until we let go of the big difficult things to let go of. So you know, it might be that small thing might be that you're driving a car and you come up against the red light. And you feel impatient. And it doesn't really help the light to turn green faster to be impatient. So maybe there you can let go of the impatience, relax, and open, and just be present in a calm way until the light changes. And maybe you can practice in small places like that, what letting go is. And then we grow. The other aspect of this abandoning unskillful states is what's called restraint. Not a very popular idea I think in the United States. But it's very popular traditionally in Buddhism and the teachings of the Buddha and down through the centuries. And that is that it's granted, it's understood that all kinds of unwholesome maybe even harmful impulses will arise. And there's no need to feel bad about that. If we can not give into it. If we don't pick it up and act on them. And the ability to let these things be there and not pick them up, act on them, not be pushed into speaking or doing because of them. That's called restraint. And that's considered to be a tremendous safeguard, protection for ourselves and the world around us. Sometimes, it's a lot less painful to restrain than it is to try to clean up afterwards when we've said something that was unkind.

So kind of in summary, the first two of these four right efforts is the effort to prevent unskillful or unwholesome states to arise. And if they do arise, to learn to let go of them. To do this we have to learn to recognize that they're there. We have to learn to recognize what is not necessarily our best qualities inside. And to do it with lots of generosity, lots of openness, lots of kindness, lots of willingness. Kind of "Yes. Okay, this too, is here." Without needing to define ourselves by it or feel bad about ourselves for it. In fact, it's actually a very good personal quality, to have this self honesty. "Oh, it's like this." And if you want a little extra help to make it easier, then I don't know if this is helpful or easy to do, but it's kind of nice to be amused by yourself. Be amused by all the shenanigans that go on inside. Kind of like, "Wow, that's quite something happening in there." And that might kind of break some of the trance, some of the strong identification we have around some of these negative states that can that can happen.

Whether it's kindness or amusement, I hope that the idea of honest assessment of where we are and learning wisely and happily to avoid, to prevent, and to let go. And over time to learn that this is one of the great arts of wise life. It's an art that allows us to come into wholeness, because the unskillful states tend to be states that come out of our being divided from ourselves or disconnected in some way from ourselves.

So I hope that you move in the direction of greater wholeness and goodness and that you find it valuable to practice the first two right efforts. Thank you.