

Viriya (3 of 5): Continuous Effort

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on March 25, 2020

This only the second week that I am figuring out how this way of broadcasting via YouTube works. Our little exchanges around the mikes and the volume at the beginning were actually quite nice for me. It began to dissolve the idea that this medium is a little impersonal. Seeing your responses and feeling your support in figuring this out, in this interactive this way – I felt even more delight, warmth, and happiness to share this with all of you. So thank you.

I will continue this five-part series on effort in practice, especially in meditation practice. The first day was initiating effort, and then it was being able to discern the appropriate places to put effort – right endeavor. We put our life energy into things that are supportive, helpful, freeing, skillful. And we avoid putting our effort into what is not skillful or not helpful.

As we do this more, we get a sense of how to navigate where and how we place our focus and effort. This is part of meditation, of engaging with the present moment. It's certainly to get busy, trying to adjust everything all the time. But if we really take this to heart and understand the discernment toward what is helpful and supportive, at some point we realize that working too hard, straining, or being busy is actually counterproductive. In trying to do meditation perfectly, we only end up doing it imperfectly.

I think that to have a meditation practice that is 60% good is actually better than trying to be 90% or 100% good. We want to give ourselves leeway, to be relaxed about how things are, and not to be troubled by how things are – so that there can be a greater settling, letting go, and discovery of ease with what is.

Of course there are difficulties as we meditate. Then the effort can be how to not be troubled by the difficulty – how to not get reactive, constricted, tight, or self-critical around the difficulties. The effort is to find how to be in a way that is more at ease, less stressed. Right endeavor is not a problem; it's actually settling and freeing.

As we go along with this practice, and build up continuity of effort, of being engaged in meditation, we find that it is nourishing to be engaged. It's settling, and it feels as if doors are opening to greater calm, peace, or equanimity. It's like we are connected to what is authentic and real – as opposed to fixing, manipulating, or changing what is going on.

The third kind of effort that I want to focus on today could be called “continuous effort.” That might sound like a lot of work. Another way to describe it may be as being “persistently relaxed,” or as “relaxed persistence” – continuity of effort that is at ease, relaxed, and is built into how we are aware. Then we settle in, and let that become more continuous. This builds naturally on its own.

As the mind wanders off and then settles back, settles back, the momentum of being lost in thought begins to quiet down. Every time we start over again, we are decreasing the amount of fuel that keeps our thinking active. The amount of fuel that we decrease might be imperceptible, but if we do it a hundred times in a session of meditation, it makes a difference. We come back to the present moment, and we just have gentle dedication: “Let's just stay here, hang out here. Let's be upright, have some strength, and just be here with experience – not straining, demanding, or even expecting to be successful.” Just dedication, or maybe devotion.

Over time the idea is to cultivate and find continuity. A lot of the deeper benefits of meditation come when the effort to be present or the ability to be present has continuity through time. This is not just in formal meditation, but also in everyday life. If we can attend to being aware as we go through the day, our continuity of awareness is like a magnet for beneficial states, for better self-understanding. It gives us greater capacity to not continue fueling unhelpful states – states caught up in greed, hate, and delusion – or collapsing into fear.

This continuity of attention provides breathing room for our life, greater space, greater connection to what's going on. The direction is towards continuous effort. At the beginning it takes a little work, remembering it, and valuing it. This is supported by feeling the goodness of it. If we keep thinking that it's work, or we are being self-critical, it isn't a very pleasant or inviting state for the mind to stay present with.

On the other hand, we can hold our practice with generosity, kindness, compassion, ease, not trying too hard, not having too high a standard, not berating ourselves. Instead, we delight in our capacity to be aware, and appreciate the value of being real. Now we can be more careful. And it feels inviting and satisfying to be connected and present.

Now the effort starts to be more continuous. You want to do this. It may be a little like playing a sport or a musical instrument. If you really enjoy what you are doing, the effort to do the activity isn't like work, but more like delight in the chance to be able to do it.

It is possible to have that kind of approach with meditation. It takes a while to build it up. In order to build it up, there must be some joy, delight, or appreciation – however small it might be. Some appreciation of, "It's good to be here." This doesn't come quickly in meditation practice. Sometimes it takes months, maybe years, to really get the deep appreciation that this is home. Continuity of effort brings us toward that place.

One way to practice this effort might be held under the umbrella of the phrase "relaxed persistence." Persistence by itself might lend itself to striving or straining. Being relaxed by itself might lead to sleepiness, dullness, or complacency. But the two together – relaxed persistence – support each other. Making effort, but staying calm while making the effort.

We make the initial effort to keep showing up. That is something experienced meditators are still doing, because the mind is changeable. So sometimes the effort is to just keep showing up, again and again.

Then, as we connect to what is happening, there can be right endeavor. We find our bearings. We understand how to meditate, how to be present in a way that is supportive. We make adjustments that are helpful. At some point, we don't want to make too many adjustments because then we just keep agitating the effort. We want to make adjustments that lead to greater calm and settledness.

Then, as we settle in, we have some dedication to staying here: "Let me stay open, receptive, connected. Let me stay tethered to the moment, or to the breath in a nice way."

Many years ago I used a wonderful image for my practice to help me with the continuity of attention to my breathing. It provided something like the right tautness in the balance between persistence and relaxation. I would imagine that I was flying a kite. My understanding of flying a kite is that if there is a strong wind, you loosen the string and let it go a little bit, so that there isn't too much tension on it. But if there is less wind, you want to pull the string in, so that there is air pressure against the kite to hold it up. That was how I saw effort in meditation. As I was breathing, I wanted to keep just the right tautness between the attention and the breathing – keeping the string of attention right there. Sometimes I would let it out a little more, and let the breathing be more free as I was aware of it. Other times I would bring it closer and feel it. I was with the oscillation of breathing in and breathing out, and I was keeping attention there with this idea of the string, moving with it back and forth. Over time, this was one of many ways that I cultivated continuity of awareness.

As you go about your life today, you might see what joy and delight there is in staying aware, receptive, and attentive in a more continuous way. Maybe start with just thirty seconds at a time. Then maybe you can increase it to one or two minutes. Don't set too high a standard. Just see what benefits come from that.

Thank you very much. I look forward to coming here to IMC, sitting here alone with all of you. Until tomorrow, be well.