

Viriya (4 of 5): Mindfulness and Calm

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on March 26, 2020

Good morning. Thank you for the sitting. I'll continue now with this series of talks about effort. The talks are somewhat progressive. As people practice meditation and develop along the Buddhist path, the kind of effort that is needed changes. It develops, grows, and evolves over time. Sometimes, it may be circular or spiral. We often begin again and again with that initial effort.

What I have talked about so far is the effort that we put into the practice. Initiating effort – beginning again and again, over and over – can take a lot of work. Sometimes the forces pulling us in opposite direction from practice – desire, addiction, hatred, fear – are so strong that it can take a lot of work to come back and begin again. We take our seat, take our place, and are mindful.

As we are able to be more present, we can contribute our choice. We notice the dividing line, or the fork in the path between the mental states, thoughts, and emotions that take us toward greater stress and suffering, and those that lead to greater ease, happiness, well-being, or wisdom. There is choice involved. We choose one over the other, letting go of one, and picking up the other. And then we make some effort.

Part of the art of meditation is making effort that is continuous and persistent. Yesterday I talked about relaxed persistence. We have to offer something. Sometimes that offering of ourselves is to be more continuous – a continual opening up and allowing the attention to be there – rather than holding the attention present. The balance between making effort and allowing effort is part of the art of finding our way.

These first three days had to do with what we offer. But at some point, as we settle in and have enough relaxation, a kind of momentum or movement happens – something is being done to us. Rather than we ourselves practicing, we are being practiced.

I sometimes think of this as Dharma energy, or the Dharma beginning to move through us. As the Dharma moves through us, something begins to unfold. The pieces come into place through our practice, allowing for this inner process of healing, evolving, or liberating, which flows and moves through us.

The Buddha used a lot of different metaphors to refer to this inner movement that is not of our doing. The previous effort puts together the conditions, and creates the right environment for this seed to grow and become a great plant. Or, the boulder covering the spring is taken away, so that now the water can flow out from the spring. Something begins to flow within us – to open and evolve within us.

We learn to recognize and allow for something within us, which is not us, to begin to operate. It's not the person we identify as the one having agency or being in charge. It's not the ideas we organize ourselves around to get along in the world, and which are often useful. But as the practice gets deeper, if we only stay in the part of ourselves we identify with, then we won't allow for this deeper Dharma energy to flow and evolve.

Sometimes I think of this Dharma energy as a relative of the idea of *qi*. At some point as we sit, this *qi* or energy arises from inside us to awaken and lift us. It keeps us engaged in the practice, and it becomes almost second nature to be alert and present. We don't have to work at it. Mostly, we have to keep the boulders away from the spring, keep the weeds away from the plants. We clear the ground, and let go of the distractions in order to allow this kind of energy or aliveness to move through us.

Movements of compassion can well up. Some of the deepest forms of compassion, love, or care are not those we intentionally bring up, but rather they happen when we make space for them. We might have the intention for this. The intention is like opening the door to a particular room where compassion lives and can flow forth.

We can allow for wisdom, for greater, deeper understanding or intuition about how to find our way. Rather than thinking it out or solving it with our minds, it's more like we relax enough to let our important concerns be processed, so that solutions, ideas, and perspectives can well up from within.

The more we allow this Dharma energy to flow, the more things seem like second nature. If you put your hand on a hot stove, the hand will pull away. It's second nature to pull away and not get burned. At some point a greater sensitivity can come with mindfulness if we are relaxed and calm. We become sensitive to the slightest little ouch, the slightest little place we hurt ourselves, getting contracted or caught in anger, or hostility, or some addiction. We are sensitive to how it hurts in a way that we can't be sensitive to the subjective impact if we are caught or blinded by the object of our desire or ill will. If we relax enough to really settle in and feel what is happening when we are caught in the grip of desire or hostility, then we see, "Oh, this hurts."

As we start feeling that sensitivity, of course we take our hand away from the stove. It's not like we even choose to do it. The whole system, the Dharma system that we are, begins to relax and pull away. Then, sooner or later, we begin to feel the benefits of practice – the sense of relaxation, the qualities of freedom and ease that come along with the practice. Then, of course we lean toward that.

The whole system is like gravity. If you put a ball at the top of a slope, it will roll downhill. Our whole system wants to roll down toward greater and greater freedom. As we get a sense of freedom and openness in meditation, then of course, our whole heart and system want to flow downhill and keep opening. It's a lot of work to stay contracted and tight. So of course, it wants to relax and rest.

We start becoming sensitive to, aware that something else is operating in this practice besides what we do or are in charge of. We are in charge of initiating effort. We are in charge of some choices between what is wholesome and unwholesome, useful and not useful. We are in charge of trying to support the continuity of awareness throughout the day.

But as these begin to grow, we start to become sensitive to something else operating, something we can't quite take as being personal. It's in us, and is part of us in a sense, but not what we usually identify as being me, myself, and mine. It's helpful not to identify it that way, but to realize that something much greater is supporting us. A wonderful natural process within us has tremendous capacity for support and goodness.

And so we begin to become sensitive to the deeper things operating. At first, it may be just a little shy whisper, hesitant to show itself. We want to be quiet and caring of it, not frighten it, or grab hold of it. Rather, we slowly allow it to grow and develop.

The more we are aware of it, the more we open to it and hold this Dharma energy, Dharma momentum – the more space it has to grow. It's like awareness is the sun, and Dharma energy is the plant. We bring the sun of awareness so that the Dharma plant can become great. Sooner or later, that plant will grow and develop wonderful fruit. And one day that fruit, like an apple, will fall from the tree into the palm of your heart.

May all of your fruits bring you great freedom as they fall into your heart.

Thank you very much for being here today. Tomorrow I will do the last of this series on effort. Next week I will go on to the next of the five faculties, which is mindfulness, and I will offer a series of five talks on five different aspects of mindfulness.

Thank you all very much.