

Viriya (5 of 5) Effortless Effort

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on March 27, 2020

I am continuing on the theme for this week: the energy, the effort factor of the Five Faculties. The last aspect of the effort faculty might be called “effortless effort.” A time comes when what is carrying us in meditation or in our life is a very wholesome and healthy momentum, effort, engagement, aliveness, vitality. It doesn’t seem to be something we are making effort to do. In that sense, it is effortless from the viewpoint of our work – but something is working.

My analogy for this is from when I used to run a lot. When I began running, for the first fifty to hundred feet at least, signals would come from my body basically saying, “Stop. Don’t do this. This is too difficult.” I just ran anyway, knowing that I didn’t have to listen to this. Some of it was that making that effort was just too unpleasant. But then, as I kept going and going, I would get into the groove or the rhythm of running. And, at some point, it would feel like the running was effortless.

The body was running. Running was running itself. It was a great joy. I’m sure I was expending a lot of calories, a lot of energy, but the involvement, the harmony, the attunement, relaxing into it, the rhythm of it, was just effortless, as if it were happening on its own.

I think a lot of activities can be that way. Maybe playing a sport or an instrument can feel that way, doing something we enjoy or get really absorbed in doing. The same thing can happen in meditation when we give ourselves wholeheartedly to it, placing ourselves in the middle of our experience. “This is what we’re doing.” It’s not an easy task.

Meditation is harder than things that grab our interest, or are fascinating in and of themselves. But that is part of the benefit of meditation. We are discovering how to really be present and be here in a full, complete way without needing the extra help of fascinating things that bring us joy or satisfaction.

Doing things that are dangerous can really engage us because there is just the right amount of danger. But we’re being very simple and ordinary, working through all the different activities of the mind and heart that get in the way of the full embodiment of just being here in a simple way. Not chasing after our desires or running away from what we don’t want. Just here.

It’s a difficult task, but to have that full embodiment in meditation, which is effortless effort, seems like we’re just here. It is a wonderful stage of meditation, and is satisfying in and of itself. It creates a wonderful platform for deeper and deeper layers of letting go. If there’s something besides us that’s operating – if it’s effortless – then it begins coming clear that the ego, the self-identity, the contraction around self, me being the agent, is not needed as much. And we begin loosening up the tight grip that self has on us. This space of effortless effort can help us relax and soften.

The topic of effort this week has many perspectives. One interesting perspective is this ongoing process of letting go. With letting go, come benefits. Something arises. One could talk about what arises and comes into place in practice, but the end of the path in Buddhist practice is a very deep letting go – release.

It may be interesting to go back over these five days to see how each of these steps represents a kind of letting go. The initiating effort is letting go of something we are doing in order to start fresh, start new, here and now. Even if we are just starting to meditate, we have to let go of some activities of the day – stop looking at emails, for example.

We let go of something in daily life to sit down and be here. Once we are here, the initiating effort is to let go of the stream of thinking we are caught up in that makes it impossible to really be present in a full way. Initiating effort is letting go of some degree of preoccupation.

As we settle down further, then the right endeavor aspect of effort comes when we can differentiate between what is healthy, wholesome, and helpful to be involved in and what is not. Then we let go of what is unhealthy

and unwholesome. Even if there is not active pushing away or active letting go, what we are letting go of is our clinging, our involvement. That may be enough. The thoughts might still be there, but we are holding them in a very broad mind and are not actually involved anymore. There's a kind of letting go there.

Then sometimes the wholesome things arise on their own, which gets to the third aspect of effort. The third aspect is persistent effort – persistent, relaxed effort. This is letting go of the things that come along that want to pull us out of the flow of the practice. It's possible to notice a thought arise, and to be so attentive that you begin to see an interest in it, but the mind says, "No thank you." And you stay in the flow of awareness.

Another thought comes, and "No thank you." You stay in the flow of awareness. When I was really in the flow of awareness, at times I felt that a rubber band was attached to my thoughts. If I wandered off in my thoughts, the rubber band would get stretched, and then at some point, pull me right back into the present moment. And so it's: "Keep coming back, keep coming back," and this involves some form of letting go.

And then this Dharma energy starts to arise – something else starts to carry us, to move through us. Then the letting go is of that interferes with that. Maybe letting go of the idea that I have to do it – that it's always up to me. Instead, we make space for something to move, and we let go of what crowds the space. We let go of the idea that I am in charge here. We allow the Dharma energy to begin to move through us.

Then, the effortless effort is the place where there can be a lot of letting go. Effortless effort is almost like a continuation of the Dharma energy that can arise.

It can also be a place of equanimity, non-reactivity, non-resistance, non-preference, non-attachment. We get a feeling for this equanimity and non-attachment that is very sensitive to the smallest, most subtle movements of attachment. Allowing this to grow and flower involves even more letting go.

At some point, the benefit of being in the stream of equanimity and effortless effort comes in the form of release and letting go that correspond to awakening in Buddhism. It's not something that we can do. We don't say, "Now I'm going to be awake. Now I'm going to let go once and for all in a deep way."

There has to be a lot of not-self, a lot of non-reactivity, a lot of not creating anything – thinking about things, making a self, resisting anything – a lot of effortless effort, a lot of equanimity. A lot of letting go has brought us to this point.

An ancient analogy is that of a rope. Over time and weathering, the rope has gotten thinner and thinner, until only one little thread holds that rope together. And at some point that last thread just lets go. The last holding on of attachment lets go.

Then effortless effort takes on a whole different quality. In a certain profound way, the psycho-physical system recognizes that nothing more needs to be done. No effort of a certain kind needs to be expended.

In the effort to search for freedom, to move along a path to liberation – we recognize a place within us where there is nothing to attain, nothing to do, nothing to be. There is a beautiful absence of so many things that crowd, limit, and propel us.

We begin to recognize that within us is this place of no effort. It's a particular kind of place, which is not lethargy, dullness, or inertia. No effort is needed. Nothing needs to be done. Nothing needs to be attained. Maybe initially it's not a dramatic place, but it's clear enough as a reference point. That too is a reference point to better and better recognize all the places where we still have work to do – all the places where the practice still needs to unfold and grow.

And then, we come back to initiating effort. We begin as beginners, starting over – not trying to hold on to some greater or ideal state. We come back to being a beginner again, initiating effort – hopefully, the degree to which we let go allows us to do that with greater equanimity, less self, greater ease, greater appreciation and joy at the very opportunity to make the effort to practice.

We are very fortunate to have a practice, very fortunate to be able to make this effort.

May it be that we can make this effort forever together, and find a wonderful way in which we all support this world to become a safer, happier, and freer place for all beings.

Thank you.

Q & A (14:15)

For those of you who would like to stay on, I am happy to use the chat box to answer questions you have.

Question: How much media do you consume about the virus?

Answer: Actually I don't do a lot. I may read two or three articles a day but I am certainly not keeping up with how much would be useful to know. Maybe useful is not the right word. That I could know. I feel like I pick up plenty of what's happening. I feel that I know enough to really be concerned and to have a lot of empathy and care for what is going on in the world. I talk to people who are affected by all of the changes going on with the virus. It's pretty dramatic what is happening all over the world. I am trying to find a balance between how much would be useful to know, both as a person, but also as a teacher who is responsive to a community of people who may be wanting some kind of relevant teaching at this time. Trying to find a balance with that, versus the other activities I do – a balance between the impact those have on me and how to stay balanced and not be consumed. I try to do the news in wise ways. I try to do it at times and places where it feels I can read the news in a balanced, relaxed way. I either take it in small doses so that I can reflect on it and live with it, or I try to do it when my powers of reflection are strong.

Question: Will we meet at 7 a.m. Pacific time this weekend?

Answer: We are not going to meet Saturday and Sunday. My plan is to continue these 7 a.m. sittings and talks. We are doing a series now on the Five Faculties. We have covered the first two now. Next week I will talk about the five aspects of mindfulness.

Question: Do we need to know the phase of effort at any given moment? If so, in what balanced way do we do that without getting caught up?

Answer: That's a great question. I think if your practice is sincere and you are really engaged and careful with devoted mindfulness – making space, staying with the breath – and you feel encouraged to do that, you don't have to know where you are, how far you have gotten, measuring yourself. It will all unfold by itself. It will all reveal itself to you. There are some advantages sometimes to identifying where we are in practice because then we can open to that phase a little more fully, allow for it, appreciate it, value it. So there is value to it, and that's why I am teaching this. But we have to be very careful not to try too hard, or spend a lot of time measuring ourselves. You want to be very patient with this practice. Perhaps if we had six days to do the effort, one of the efforts would have been patient effort.

Question: What should I focus on when I am having a very difficult meditation session, and cannot quiet my mind or focus on the present moment or breath at all?

Answer: Yeah, that's a common experience for all of us. What do we do then? There are a few things you could do. If the primary thing you want to do is keep developing mindfulness practice, you might just turn toward the very difficulties you are having and let them be the focus of mindfulness. Not to let them be a distraction, but to let them become the meditation. Don't try to quiet the mind, but do mindfulness of a noisy or busy mind. The breath does not have to be the subject of meditation. The present moment does. But now to be in the present moment with a busy agitated mind. Really feel the agitation. This is where mental noting can be helpful. The mind is out of control. You note, "Wow! This is a mind that is out of control. Really active." You can even say this gently to yourself until you pull yourself out of the entanglement with it. You step back and see, "Oh, this is what is happening." What I do sometimes when my mind is really busy thinking and I can't seem to settle down, I'll say to myself the word, 'here.' H-E-R-E. Just here. When I say 'here,' I open my awareness up to receive and

recognize what is here. It's very permissive, very allowing. I don't have an agenda. Here. When I'm so caught up in things, HERE opens things up just for a second. Then I'll notice, "Oh, here is a mind that is out of control. Here is a mind that is troubled." And I'll try in that moment to just stay and recognize it. I'm allowing myself to be the way I am, but stepping back and recognizing it. Here. And I'll do it again. Here. I'll do it repeatedly. Very permissive, but really recognizing what is there. After maybe five minutes of doing that, generally I begin to loosen the grip of what I'm thinking about. Then it begins to soften and relax. Then I might start to focus on my breathing, because then I have the capacity to stay there and develop that.

An interesting thing to do when the mind is out of control or having a lot of difficulty is to identify if there is an emotion fueling it all. Then do mindfulness of emotions with it. Really feel where it is in the body. I will talk about this in the meditation class coming up next week.

Question: How to practice in the middle of the night when raw fear arises.

Answer: Yes. It is easy to have raw fear, especially with what is happening in the world these days. Some people wake up in the middle of the night with anxiety and fear because the usual distractions and preoccupations of the day are quieted down. When we sleep, it seems we touch into some of the deeper layers of what is really going on for us. Fear is one. It's not uncommon for people to wake up in the middle of the night and feel the fear. I have had that sometimes when I had concern for a particular relative who has challenges. I seem to wake up at 2. If I wake up at 2, I know there is a little layer of anxiety around the relative I'm thinking about. What to do? It depends a little on how strong it is. Raw fear is a strong term. One possibility is to start mindfulness practice. It might be helpful to sit up in bed, or go to your meditation cushion. The intention of taking an upright posture rather than staying in bed gives a little bit of freedom, kind of like breaking the crust of the fear. You are empowering yourself to sit there in a clear, conscious way. Then feel the fear. Unless it triggers more fear to feel the fear, allow yourself to feel afraid. It's not a mistake to feel afraid. It's uncomfortable, but if you're only free when you're comfortable, then you are not really free. So what does it mean to be free while being afraid? Is that possible? Is it possible to somehow step back from the fear enough so that you aren't afraid, but there is fear here? If it's you who is afraid, it's hard to offer care to the fear. But if you really see that fear is happening here, then you can bring care and kindness to it. You can offer safety to it. You don't want to fix it, get rid of it, see it as wrong or as a problem. Just make space, and allow what is going on. Allow yourself to begin experiencing the layers and dimensions of the fear, the beliefs operating, the memories being triggered, the feelings in the body, your relationship to fear, etc. Then, if none of that helps and the fear is really strong, do something that is really grounding. Go get some warm milk, have some food, maybe take a warm shower, sometimes journaling can help ground you. Distract yourself from it. Read a book. Do something to take you out of the grip of it. And, finally, please try to hold yourself with a lot of compassion these days. Lots of care, love, attention, respect. This is not an easy time we are going through, but it is a very important time for us to really have a chance to look at and work with and resolve some of the deeper spiritual, psychological issues that are part of the path to liberation, but seldom get stirred up this far. Someone on the path to liberation may see that this is where the practice is: now it's time to really practice. Now I am ready to work with this fear.

Thank you all for coming and being part of this. I hope this supports you, and I look forward to continuing on Monday.