

Dharma talk: Right effort
4/23/16

A dharma talk is a very strange thing.
Dropping ideas into this rich silence.
Words entering from the external environment.

If an idea is helpful, let it stir you, move around in you.
If it doesn't, let it go.
It is not the right idea for you, at this moment.

Does this idea further understanding, or does it twist you in knots, or get you to arguing? If it adds confusion, let it go.

We are letting go of what is not wholesome for us, and letting what fosters wholesomeness work within us.

As we just sit here.

Mind, body, feelings are all part of the whole mind-body, as one. No dividing line.
All passing phenomena are included.

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This is the time of day when the last stretch of the afternoon can loom before us like an uncharted desert, or an arduous climb up a mountain.

So let's make it easier on ourselves, deliberately.

We *can* practice in a way that values comfort and ease, as well as alert clarity.

Mindfulness and right concentration and right effort need each other. Let's remember that right concentration and right effort are not hard work.

If there is a struggle for mindfulness, then the struggle itself lets us know when we are ensnared by our familiar and favorite hindrances...flurry and worry, ill-will or hatred, sluggishness, self-doubt, or desire to be entertained in any distracting manner. Is this where I am caught? And return to sensation.

If our concentration is imbued with a kind of striving or pressing against the next moment, then we undermine the foundation of ease that we need to sit here.

We are better served by cultivating a relaxed, dedicated, and sustained focus.
This leads to simply dwelling in well-being. We are doing nothing.

There is a natural shift in consciousness, from an effort to get somewhere, to simply sitting here, awake. And we don't even have to make that shift happen.

Right concentration is attentive stillness. Any act of will disturbs the process of letting the mind still itself.

We can learn to trust the mind to settle itself.

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Here is a little teaching story:

I can hold a glass of water in my hand and ask the observer to let me know when the water becomes still. No matter how hard I try, I cannot hold the glass still enough to keep the water from moving. There is always some agitation. Trying to hold the glass of water still is like trying to hold your mind still. There is no way anyone can marshal enough will to hold her mind still.

But if I place the glass of water on the ground, the water moves less and less, until after a bit, it comes to a stage of stillness that I can never achieve if I work hard to not move my hand.

If we let go of will, and choice, and controlling, and directing, then the mind becomes increasingly still all on its own. This is a natural process. The cause of the agitation has been removed.

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As I simply sit here, I become an interested and awake, and sometimes, a pleasant passenger, rather than a driver of the meditation. Just sitting around, senses wide open, receptive.

Right concentration is attentive stillness. Attentive stillness can exist even when the mind-body is noisy.

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When we talk about right effort we sometimes use terms like right endeavor, or right persistence, or right diligence.

It is balanced, but sustained application of energy. It is like tuning a stringed instrument. We want the string to be not too tight, and not too loose. We want just the right amount of effort. Our inner Goldie Locks can recognize it when we feel it: not too tight or not too loose, but just right.

We can easily have the mistaken notion that effort means I am doing something to some aspect of myself. This heightens the notion that will is fully functioning and will solve a problem of mind.

But right effort is not that.

We are moving toward “effortless effort”.

It is more like right effort notices opportunities for something new, rather than simply following the ruts of our habitual conditioned responses.

Right effort is part of our curiosity. It is part of our investigation.

It is informed by our intention. Our intention can help point our attention in a valued direction. It can help determine what our attention notices, what our attention perceives.

Without intention as part of our practice, we will end up dwelling in body, in feelings, and in mind, dictated by our usual habits.

And where we habitually dwell seems as *if* it is the only important and essential thing. That is delusion.

However, if we form an intention for cultivating wholesome, then opportunities for something new naturally follows.

We can use the following metaphor to elaborate. We can get stuck in the familiar and compelling dark swamplands of our usual reactivity, habits, and moods. The landscape is all too familiar, and we feel bogged down. The intention of right effort can help us notice an exit sign that appears in the swamp, which you never noticed before. It says: turn this way for something lighter. With intention, attention remembers there is more to this internal landscape than the muck where we get stuck. With practice, this route out of the familiar swamp-scape becomes part of the newly developing internal environment. A healthy, wholesome habit is included.

In the new opening which attention has discovered, gladness and lightness can naturally arise. Freedom.

Can we value gladness, lightness of being enough to allow it to arise?
When we fall back into the familiar discomforts and discontents, can right effort redirect what attention seeks? Come and see.

Memo to my stream of consciousness, which I can't control: if you find an opening for wholesomeness, please take it.

Remember, the word wholesome has whole for a root. Nothing is excluded.

Right effort is the energy and the intention necessary for the task of penetrating what used to be fixed phenomena. Right effort lets all phenomena become new and transient. We approach all with a not-knowing anything curiosity.

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So, we are just sitting here. We can let our reactivity to our knees or our backs become interesting. The pain itself becomes a variable sensation. The fear that Rhonda fell asleep and won't ring the bell, becomes scrutinized for its features: emotional, physical, and in mind. The fear that gets evoked because you don't know when the bell will ring becomes the object of curiosity.

Relax consciousness within the swampland, or the storm of the moment, and it becomes is revealed as transient reactivity.

Have trust in the method that does not look upon mental dullness and excitation as faults.

We take away striving.

We take away any romantic notions of practice.

We take away any idea of perfection.

Effortless effort—divested of any goal or expectation.

Use effort as an expression of wholesome desire, until desire itself is abandoned.

There can be a natural state of stillness even while the mind is fluctuating, busy, or demanding. The dividing line between stillness and fluctuation is erased. This is what it means to encounter the firm ground of equanimity. Then one can experience stillness whether or not the mind is running around, the body aches, or we are flooded with feeling.

With right concentration and right effort, attention does its own thing, awake.

Attention becomes aware of the whole body-mind without discrimination.

Attention becomes aware of the body-mind in context—the heat it throws off, the movement or heat of our neighbors, within the whole room, or the birds chattering. It becomes a call and response of mind-body within this context.

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And we just sit here, resting in being.

No work to do.

No thing to fix.

No right or wrong way to breathe or to feel.

No thing to hold on to.

No thing to push away.

Inviting wholesomeness.

Simply sitting here. Easy.