

Spirit Rock Meditation Center

January 16, 2013

WISE EFFORT: MOVING FROM NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTIONS TO RELIABLE HABITS

Dharma Talk

This morning I want to explore Wise Effort and the practices that make wise effort easier. Both the wise part and the effort part are important in the Buddhist understanding of wise effort. There are two reasons I want to explore Wise Effort this morning.

1. Wise Effort is the engine of the noble 8-fold path. Wise Effort is one of the 8 steps of the path. It's significant that the Buddha taught Wise Effort as essential to awakening and enlightenment.

But Sylvia Boorstein considers wise effort "the unsung hero of the ennobling 8-fold path." I agree with that. Wise effort is necessary for any of the 7 other steps to be effective. It's the basic engine of all the rest. Even to know what is wise, as in wise view or wise understanding, takes wise effort. That wise view, which provides us with a moral compass that guides us in our efforts to live consciously, compassionately, helps us set our intentions in a wise direction so that our wise effort leads to more wisdom and compassion, less suffering and more ease. Wise effort helps create the presencing of the mindfulness that leads to insight and compassion and all the other heart practices that make it possible to fully open our awareness to what is, discern options, and choose wisely. Then those wise choices lead to wise speech, wise action, wise livelihood. So wise effort is foundational to every step of practice on the 8 fold path, or any path.

2. The second reason is that we've just turned into a new year; we're in a season when people make new year's resolutions with the best of intentions. Then unless we have very practical and productive ways to turn those resolutions into reliable habits, they can just slip away.

Julia Butterfly Hill reminds us that every moment brings a choice, and every choice has an impact. Every moment brings a choice, and every choice has an impact. So Wise Effort is a step on the 8-fold path we can practice at every moment, every day.

Last week I had about a 15-minute wait at my doctor's office. Every moment of those 15 minutes I had choices. I could read a magazine or the book I brought. I could check e-mails on my phone. I could plan dinner or plan the weekend. I could zone out or daydream. I could people watch, or meditate, or do a gratitude practice. I could choose. And every choice was going to have an impact. Every moment we focus our attention on anything, incline our mind toward anything, we change the structure and functioning of our brain.

Whatever I chose to focus my attention on and do in the doctor's office, read, check e-mail, meditate, practice gratitude, that focus of attention, that experience of one particular behavior was strengthening the circuits in my brain that I use to focus that attention on that behavior. The attention and behavior was strengthening the habit of that behavior, digging grooves deeper in my neural circuitry that would support that behavior and make it easier to do that same behavior again another time. We create habits in our responses to life by what we choose to do

repetitively or where we choose to focus our attention repetitively. We might not call Wise Effort self-directed neuroplasticity, but that's what it is. And part of Wise Effort is choosing what we focus our attention on. What we incline our mind toward, so that we move our practice and our lives in the direction of awakening and enlightenment, toward conscious, compassionate living.

Traditionally, wise effort is taught as letting go of the unwholesome and cultivating the wholesome. Even more traditionally, taught in four steps:

1) When there is no unwholesome, to not let any arise. There is so much to do in this world, don't go looking for suffering, don't go stirring up trouble, and if it ain't broke, don't fix it.

2) When there is unwholesome, to let it go. Not always easy. The Buddha taught: "Abandon what is unskillful. One can abandon the unskillful. If it were not possible, I would not ask you to do so." We all know we can get really hooked, what Pema Chodron calls shenpa, we can get hijacked by old patterns. We can be really attached to old views, beliefs, behaviors.

I had lunch with David Richo yesterday; David has written many books on wise effort, especially in relationships and taught many daylongs here at Spirit Rock. He reminded me that this difficulty of getting hooked is spoken to in the Christian tradition as well. St. Paul lamented, "I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and holding me captive." One member or voice or part or habit of ourselves, a trickster part, often holds sway over our higher intentions. We can experience a resistance or stubbornness about letting go of the unwholesome.

I remember early in my practice hearing Guy Armstrong say that the Buddha taught: when we are really hooked by something unwholesome, sometimes we have to pull it up by the roots, throw it on the ground and stomp it to death. I was so relieved to hear that this practice meant business.

3. When there is wholesome, to recognize it and take in the good. When we experience the wholesome, to notice, experience, savor for 10-30 seconds, give the brain the time it needs to install the wholesome as resource. The more we can repeat that experience of the wholesome, the more readily, the more easily we can access it. And the more we can fill ourselves up with the wholesome, the easier it becomes to let go of the unwholesome.

4. Where there is no wholesome, to cultivate it. Our traditional practices of cultivating kindness, compassion, gratitude, patience, perseverance, equanimity. And the Buddha taught, when we are determined to increase the wholesome, we should practice as though our hair were on fire. To be ardent, diligent, and resolute. Like you really mean it. Wise effort is all about abandoning the unskillful and cultivating the skillful through a sometimes fierce effort of awareness and choice.

I said earlier both the wise part and the effort part are important. How do we know what is wise and wholesome and what is unwise and unwholesome, and how do we learn the most productive ways to wisely exert our effort?

Every tradition has its lists of what is wholesome and unwholesome. In the Buddhist tradition, we are encouraged to cultivate the 10 paramitas: generosity, morality, renunciation (the letting go), wisdom, energy, patience, truthfulness, determination (the fierce effort), loving kindness, equanimity, and the 7 factors of enlightenment (mindfulness, investigation, energy, joy, tranquility, concentration, equanimity). The four Brahma Viharas: loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, equanimity. Do you notice that equanimity, not reacting to our reactions, is on every list.? As the metta sutta instructs, to do nothing which the wise would later reprove.

I love how modern neuroscience is weighing in here, demonstrating over and over that cultivating these qualities, the paramis, the factors, the brahma viharas, changes the brain, creates new structures, new circuits. Besides becoming more mindful, more compassionate, more equanimous, the science tells us we also become more creative and productive, more flexible and resilient, more charitable and more cooperative, are healthier and live longer than folks who don't cultivate the wholesome. We *broaden* habitual modes of thinking or acting and actually *build* enduring personal resources that last beyond the moment, deepening insights, increasing social bonds and social support, and altering world views. We feel better *and* function better. making it easier for the brain to learn even more new skills, even more new behaviors, new points of view, new ways of being. We have more appreciation of inter-connectedness as we move me "me" to "we." We put the brakes on negativity and come into engagement with ourselves and the world in ways that are wise and compassionate, so we can expand our capacities for resilience and well-being.

Then there is the effort part. I'm going to present three contemporary modes of practice, plus one of my own; these paths of practice are available on my website under Resources for Recovering Resilience, last week, last weekend, and tomorrow.

The first is the Greater Good Science Center at U.C. Berkeley, (www.greatergood.berkeley.edu) which for the last 15 years has been devoted to research on the wholesome – compassion, altruism, forgiveness, an absolutely terrific resources. Subscribers can receive free e-mail tips every day. Greater Good research developed Six Top Practices for cultivating the wholesome, which they call happiness, human goodness and well-being.

Pay Attention - Mindfulness

Give Thanks - Gratitude

Keep Friends Close - Empathy and Compassion

Drop Grudges – Forgiveness

Practice Kindness – Loving Kindness

Get Moving - spiritual movement practice: Yoga, Tai Chi, Xi Gong

1. Pay Attention: Mindfulness means to pay attention to experience in the moment without judgment and without resistance. Mindfulness sharpens our awareness, leads to insight, creates a pause where we can step back and reflect so that we can discern the wholesome from the unwholesome and choose wisely for the higher good. Research shows mindful people are less likely to be hostile or anxious, and because of that, less likely to become ill. Wise Effort

2. Give Thanks: Regular expressions of gratitude promote optimism, better health, and greater satisfaction with life; people who practice gratitude daily tend to live 7-9 years longer than people who don't. Wise Effort.
3. Keep Friends Close: Social connections are key to happiness; make time for those closest to you. Bonding and belonging creates safety and trust, love and joy. The Dalai Lama says: Consider the following. We humans are social beings. We come into the world as the result of others' actions. We survive here in dependence on others. Whether we like it or not, there is hardly a moment of our lives when we do not benefit from others' activities. For this reason it is hardly surprising that most of our happiness arises in the context of our relationships with others. —Tenzin Gyatso, fourteenth Dalai Lama Wise Effort
4. Drop Grudges: When we forgive those who have wronged us, when we let go of unwholesome self-righteousness, hatred, contempt, we feel better about ourselves, experience all of our emotions more broadly, more deeply, and feel closer to others. Wise Effort.
5. Practice Kindness: We have survived as a species because we can care for the welfare of vulnerable dependent children until they can care for themselves, and care for each other in times of distress and danger. Being kind to others makes us feel good and helps us thrive. Greater Good discovered that altruistic acts – generosity - light up the same pleasure centers in the brain as food and sex. Theodore Rubin: Kindness is more important than wisdom, and the recognition of that is the beginning of wisdom.
6. Get Moving: Regular exercise increases self-esteem, reduces anxiety and stress, and, according to Greater Good, may well be the most effective instant happiness booster of all.

All of these practices of Wise Effort, validated by modern science, also help us access our own true nature, our own embodied experience of our Buddha Nature that guides us to know what's right and what's not right to do. To do nothing that the wise would later reprove. This knowing of right and wrong, this moral compass, doesn't come so much from a list of should's and shouldn'ts, though we do undertake the training precepts to guide our practice, but more from a deep inner felt sense, an inner knowing. Does what we're doing bring us closer to the open spaciousness of awareness and acceptance, or does it close us down and obscure that state of being?

David Richo writes:

There is a natural and inviolable tendency in things to bloom into whatever they truly are in the core of their being. All we have to do is align ourselves with what wants to happen naturally and put in the effort that is our part in helping it happen.

- David Richo

The second list of practices to support Wise Effort was developed by Dan Siegal, (www.drdansiegel.com) who has spoken here at Spirit Rock many times. Dan is the developer of interpersonal neurobiology; he has spent years teaching and training people on the integration

of mindfulness into psychotherapy. His books include *The Mindful Brain*, and *Mindsight*. He and David Rock developed a Healthy Mind Platter (like your basic food groups for nutrition): There are practices that support any wise effort:

Seven daily essential mental activities to optimize brain functioning and create well-being

Focus Time: When we closely focus on tasks in a goal-oriented way, we take on challenges that make deep connections in the brain and strengthen the part of the brain we use to develop a healthy, coherent sense of personal self.

Play Time: When we allow ourselves to be spontaneous or creative, playfully enjoying novel experiences, we help make new connections in the brain, opening us to learning and wisdom.

Connecting Time: When we connect with other people, ideally in person, and when we take time to appreciate our connection to the natural world around us, we activate and reinforce the brain's relational circuitry, which supports our practices of kindness, compassion, generosity, morality.

Physical Time: When we move our bodies, aerobically if medically possible, we strengthen the brain in many ways, creating greater elasticity and flexibility.

Sleep Time: When we give the brain the rest it needs, we consolidate learning and recover from the experiences of the day. So important, so true. Without enough sleep, there's no time for the brain to consolidate memory. So even if you learn something, without enough sleep the circuits don't get grooved; the learning is not there the next day.

and the two we practice the most in our tradition:

Time In: When we quietly reflect internally, focusing on sensations, images, feelings and thoughts, we help to better integrate the brain because we can become aware of input from all areas in the brain: body and mind, feelings and thoughts, conscious and unconscious, past, present and future.

Down Time: When we are non-focused, without any specific goal, and let our mind wander or simply relax, we help the brain recharge. We strengthen the defocusing network of the brain that allows epiphanies, revelations, and insights to pop up out of the

blue. This kind of attention allows us to access experiences of non-self.

The third list comes from the Awakening Joy course taught by James Baraz, co-founder of Spirit Rock. The course is entering its 10th year; you can still sign up for 2013 at www.awakeningjoyinfo. The steps are: intention, mindfulness, gratitude, resilience, integrity, letting go, loving self, loving others, compassion, simply being. Excellent wise effort to lead to more happiness, contentment, ease. If you haven't yet taken the course, I highly encourage to you do so either in person in Berkeley or online.

My own list of practices to support Wise Effort:

Come into presence, creating the conditions to be aware of whether we are engaged in wise effort or not, and have allowing, acceptance, compassion, if we're not.

We can set our intention to persevere in our practices of wise effort – trustworthiness, energy, determination – again and again, to be ardent, diligent, resolute as well as mindful.

We can experiment with choices of behaviors and moment by moment decisions. Which is how we learn. Julia Butterfly Hill: Every moment is a choice; every choice has an impact. We act, and discern the effect of our actions, on ourselves and on others. What contracts or closes is usually unskillful; what opens and expands is usually skillful. Especially watching in our relationships: This behavior creates safety and trust; that behavior creates fear and mistrust. If we are parents raising kids: this behavior from me helps them believe in and trust themselves; that behavior does not. If we are managing people at work: this behavior from me opens the process; that behavior does not.

We discern: What blocks our trying? What are the limiting beliefs, the inner voices, that would block our wise effort. And what wise effort, what skillful means, dissolves the blocks to trying? What encourages clinging to something or the refusal to surrender to what is? What wise effort relaxes the grip? We discern: What blocks taking in the good? What wise effort dissolves that?

We ask for help: I got a vitamixer, one of those professional high speed blenders over the holidays, on sale at Whole Foods. I have such techno phobia I didn't even take it out of the box until my friend Marilynne came over to show me how to use it. but that role-modeling got me over the threshold and now I make green soup and liquid salad every other day. Wise Effort.

Now we'll learn a very practical exercise to use Wise Effort and self-directed neuroplasticity to move our resolutions or intentions for the new year to reliable habits in our brain, thus in our behavior:

1. You do your own review of your core values: the principles you want to guide your life or the qualities you want to cultivate in the coming year. You could use one of 6 practices on the Greater Good list. You want to cultivate more mindfulness, more gratitude, more connections with people, more forgiveness, more kindness, even more exercise. To illustrate this model,

well-being and ease of mind and heart are my overall goals or guiding principles for the coming year. In doing this exercise, you don't have to know the whole plan for the whole year. Pick one practice that will stretch you to experience, embody and express it as a habit.

Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs are people who have come alive.

- Howard Thurman

2. Identify a new behavior that you would like to cultivate and make a habit of that would support that larger aliveness. Researchers tell us that a habit is a behavior we don't have to think about doing anymore. It's now automatic, stored in our procedural memory.

To illustrate this practice I will use cultivating the wholesome practice of Self-Compassion I taught here last month as a behavior that will lead to more ease and well-being. Many new behaviors could lead to more ease and well-being. I choose to cultivate more self-compassion as a skillful means to that intention. I want to be able to remember to choose to practice self-compassion many moments of every day as a useful support to Wise Effort. When something upsets me or throws off my equilibrium, I have a habit that has already become automatic, to put my hand on my heart to calm myself down. Now I practice adding the mindfulness of self-compassion, "Ouch! This hurts. This is a moment of suffering."

3. Create a sequence of steps – a routine - that would begin to establish that habit. I'm choosing to do the self-compassion break; checking in with myself throughout the day: Is there any suffering here? Becoming mindful of suffering and then I can choose to do the self-compassion practice to be with and address that.

4. Then identify something you could do in 30 seconds – not 15 minutes or even 5 minutes; research shows 30 seconds - that would prime your brain to do the rest of the new sequence of behavior. Do that first 30 seconds' worth over and over until it becomes an automatic habit, and the rest of the sequence will begin to follow.

Two days ago it took more than an hour on the phone with various AT&T folks to create an account where I could pay a new phone bill online. I noticed I was becoming impatient and reactive, losing my equanimity. As soon as I put my hand on my heart and said, "Ouch! This hurts!", my brain was primed to add the "Oh sweetheart! I'm so sorry you're upset." Which, as research shows, activates the caregiving system in the mammalian part of the brain. I noticed in that moment the shift to feeling cared about, and I noticed that I was calming down.

5. Create a cue to remind yourself to do that first 30 seconds worth. This is the compassionate touch part. Touching my hand to my heart or cheek can be automatic, priming my brain to do the rest of the sequence.

6. Create a way to hold yourself accountable. I have been teaching self-compassion for months now, here, with clients, in deepening joy groups. Keeps it top of mind. If I'm teaching SC, am I living it? That's my accountability.

You can recruit a friend to practice gratitude with or share moments of experiencing kindness with. Even checking in with someone who knows and cares about your health and growth provides a tremendous boost in your confidence in your competence and helps you move from intention to action.

7. As you do your new behavior, see yourself doing the new behavior, take in the good, the benefit of the new behavior, and see yourself as someone who is creating new habits. You're creating a relationship with yourself as someone who can set an intention and achieve it, essential to your perseverance. Change is possible.

8. As you see the new habit settling into your implicit (unconscious) memory, let yourself have the reward of "good job!" However you want to say that to yourself. You'll be activating the release of dopamine in your brain, the neurotransmitter of pleasure and reward, which reinforces the "doing" that gives us that pleasure and reward again and again.

Exercise: with a partner, 5 minutes each, identify core value, wise effort you could make to cultivate or express that value; what routine you create, what 30 seconds, what cue, what accountability.

De-brief.

To bring all this back to our tradition, the Buddha taught:

The thought [or intention] manifests as the word;
 The word manifests as the deed
 The deed develops into habit
 And habit hardens into character.

So watch the thought and its ways with care
 And let it spring from love,
 Born out of concern for all beings.
 - Buddha