

Right Effort

The Sixth Factor in the Noble Eightfold Path

How is effort fruitful?

A practitioner, when not caught up, does not get caught up in suffering, and not infatuated with pleasure, does not give up appropriate pleasure.

–The Buddha (MN 101.23)

Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration are the factors of the path that address our inner activities, what we do with our minds and hearts. This focus is distinct from the emphasis on verbal and physical activities in the three preceding factors: Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood. Attention to and care with our outward actions prepare us to do the same for our inner, mental actions. As with other factors on the path, what guides this care is the intention to avoid causing harm and to engage in what is beneficial for ourselves and others.

The Buddhist tradition often refers to activities that cause harm as *unskillful* and those that are beneficial as *skillful*. The use of these terms highlights the idea that we can choose to think, speak and act in ways that are beneficial. Using the words *skillful* and *unskillful* avoids the moralistic judgments that *good* and *bad* often imply, and the absoluteness of *right* and *wrong*. Skillfulness suggests “helpfulness;” things that are unskillful are simply not helpful. When one is walking the Eightfold Path, skillful activities are those that help us move closer to peace and freedom. Those that are unskillful take us in the other direction, toward suffering and servitude.

Distinguishing mental actions that are skillful from those that are not is at the heart of Right Effort. Here mental actions refer to the thoughts, impulses, feelings, and states that arise and persist, depending on our intentions and reactions. Only by recognizing whether or not these are helpful and beneficial can we usefully choose which thoughts, impulses, feelings, or states to cultivate and which ones not

to and where we want to put our efforts. In practicing Right Effort we exercise this choice to support the path of liberation.

Right Effort involves four different ways we can apply ourselves. When it comes to our inner thoughts, feelings, and states, we can (1) prevent, (2) overcome, (3) arouse, or (4) maintain these inner experiences. Far from being uniquely Buddhist practices, these four are common throughout human life. For example, when we avoid stress by giving ourselves ample time to get to an appointment, we are preventing; when we consciously relax our impatience while waiting for a red light to turn green, we are overcoming; when we cultivate appreciation of another person, we are arousing; and when we stay calm in difficult circumstances we are maintaining.

In the practice of Right Effort we utilize these four efforts to safeguard and develop the quality of our mind and heart. The quality of our inner life is our most important asset, and it deserves our utmost care. When we see clearly that unskillful mental states decrease the quality of our inner life, it is natural to want to either prevent these states from occurring or, if they are already there, to find a way to derail them. And when we understand that there are things we can do to increase the quality of our inner life, it's healthy and makes sense to do so. In this way the quality of our inner life can be improved.

Preventing, the first of the four Right Efforts, involves avoiding and restraining. Avoiding means not putting ourselves in situations where unskillful mind states are bound to be triggered. For example, if we have an addiction, it is best to stay clear of the people, places, and things that will tempt us to indulge. If we tend to become angry when we are around angry people, maybe it is best to avoid those people. This effort to avoid is built on the understanding that we are better off without unskillful mental states and behaviors.

Restraining is the practice of not giving in to unskillful reactions and desires. It requires first recognizing impulses and thoughts of greed, ill-will, and delusion when they arise, and then holding them in check so we neither act on them nor feed them with more mental involvement.

Even better than preventing unskillful states is overcoming them, the second of the Right Efforts. At times, we can do this by simply letting go of the unhelpful mental activity we are engaged in. We see what our mind is doing—judging another person, for example, or criticizing our self—and we decide to stop it. Other times, we can achieve this by first acquiring a good understanding of the mental state we want to overcome. Sometimes, insight into the conditions that give rise to the unskillful states can show us the underlying attachments to let go of.

The third Right Effort is arousing skillful mental states, thoughts, and intentions. These mental states are not only helpful on the path of liberation, they are also satisfying in themselves. Particularly useful are the seven factors of awakening: mindfulness, investigation, energy, joy, tranquility, concentration, and equanimity. Also helpful are loving-kindness, compassion, and appreciative joy. Some of these states arise as a consequence of meditation practice and some can be purposefully cultivated with other activities.

Once skillful states have arisen, the job of the fourth Right Effort is maintaining them. This includes recognizing when skillful states are present as well as applying the first Right Effort of preventing unskillful states from arising. Continuing the actions and practices that give rise to skillful states is also a way to maintain them.

Right Effort also takes into account attention to the way in which we make effort. The kind of effort required varies depending on the circumstances—sometimes heroic effort is appropriate, and other times what's needed is an extremely light touch. It can happen that the purpose of our efforts is beneficial but the way we exert ourselves to attain this goal is not. For example, we can be too aggressive or too hesitant, too self-aggrandizing or too self-deprecating in the way we apply ourselves.

Our efforts in Buddhist practice can be delightful when the effort is free of greed, aversion, and fear. At times effort can feel almost effortless and satisfying for its own sake. Certainly it can be inspiring to know our efforts are dedicated to walking the Eightfold Path, to bringing greater peace and freedom into this world.

Additional Reading

- Bhikkhu Bodhi, “Right Effort” in *The Noble Eightfold Path*
- Bhante Gunaratana, “Right Effort” in *Eight Mindful Steps to Happiness*
- Gil Fronsdal, “Right Effort” at [Audiodharma.org](http://audiodharma.org) under ‘Dharma Practice Series’.

Reflections and Practices: Right Effort

1-The Effort of Preventing (Week 1)

This week, reflect on the states of mind, trains of thought, desires, and intentions you commonly experience that you would be better off without. Under what circumstances are these most likely to occur? What do you need to avoid in order to lessen the likelihood of these occurring? In what appropriate ways can you avoid the circumstances that tend to bring them up?

Choose to avoid one thing this week that you know is a catalyst for the arising of unskillful states in you. Notice the benefits and costs of practicing avoidance. What do you learn about yourself through doing this practice?

In addition, twice during the week spend a two-hour period of time practicing “safeguarding yourself at the sense doors.” This is the practice of staying attentive enough to the stimulus you receive that you can avoid reacting negatively. When you perceive a sight, sound, smell, taste, or touch that could trigger an unskillful mental state, recognize clearly what you are perceiving while also watching yourself. In this way, you can avoid getting involved with unskillful reactions to what you are seeing. This practice is most satisfying when it safeguards a state of mind that is peaceful, loving, or otherwise beneficial.

2- The Effort of Overcoming (Week 2)

Consider the following questions this week: When you are experiencing an unskillful mental state, what are your preferred ways of overcoming it, of causing it to go away? Are your methods healthy or unhealthy? Do your strategies come from wisdom or from aversion? How does your wisdom cast light on the practice of overcoming or abandoning unskillful states?

Notice when you are thinking unskillful thoughts—for instance, thoughts of resentment, ill-will, greed, covetousness, frightening imaginations of the future, or negative opinions about yourself or others. Once you notice them, practice letting these thoughts go. Do what you can to stop these trains of thinking. If you can’t stop them, try to distract yourself from these concerns. When you are no longer having

the unskillful thoughts notice how not having the thought feels different than having it. How does this affect your overall ability to think and evaluate wisely?

3- The Effort of Arousing (Week 3)

This week, make a list of three emotional states or attitudes that you think are worthwhile for you to cultivate. What are the circumstances that tend to evoke these emotional states or attitudes in you? In what circumstances is it appropriate to intentionally arouse them? What wise ways do you know for arousing these states and attitudes? When is it beneficial to do this and when might it be counter-productive to do this?

Choose one skillful state and spend an entire day cultivating it. This could be, for example, friendliness, joy, compassion, gratitude, generosity, calm, or equanimity. Plan ahead by picking a day when you know you will have time to actively focus on arousing this state. You might prepare by creating some reminders on Post-It notes to help you keep the quality in mind, and by selecting some short reflections or readings to look at throughout the day. What do you learn by regularly cultivating the state over the course of a day?

4-The Effort of Maintaining (Week 4)

What are some of the causes and conditions that lead you to lose touch with skillful mental states? For instance, if you are calm, how do you lose that calm? If you are happy, what causes it to fade? If you have goodwill for others, what undermines it? In contrast, what supports the continuation of these skillful states? What values, priorities, and intentions do you have that can support the continuation of skillful states? Which ones undermine them?

Choose a skillful state that you value and that you can easily evoke. This could be being relaxed before doing something that makes you anxious; it could be evoking curiosity to investigate something rather than pre-judging it; or it could be bringing forth a basic friendliness when in a gathering of strangers. Establish the skillful state just before entering a situation in which you know it will be challenging

to maintain the state. Experiment with making an effort to keep the state going throughout the situation. Afterwards, reflect on the effort you made. What can you learn about your effort? Was it wise? Were you able to find an appropriate way to maintain the skillful state? During this week, do this three times. Then, if you can, discuss your experiences with a friend.