

Eightfold Path-Right Effort (2 of 3)

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This morning, I want to talk a little more about what is known as the four right efforts or the four right endeavors.

People want to know what they should do with their life. For what endeavor, or purpose should I live my life? It is one of the great questions. These four right efforts from the Buddha offer a response to that question. It is not a response that gives something specific, rather it provides overarching practices to endeavor or approach everything we do.

These efforts help to prevent what is unskillful or bad from happening; abandon the bad that has arisen; and evoke and maintain what is good. The ideas of good and bad can be problematic, but it makes it simpler to say it that way.

In more Buddhist terms, the four right efforts prevent the arising of actions, or activities of mind, body, and speech that cause harm and are unskillful. They help prevent harmful or unskillful actions from occurring. If harmful and unskillful things do occur, let them go. The four right efforts encourage us to cultivate, develop, or evoke beneficial, skillful, and wholesome things. Once they have been evoked, maintain them. Keep them going.

In this way, we become the caretakers of our hearts and inner life. That is really the purpose of this Buddhist practice. When we get to this sixth step of the Eightfold Path, we are now talking about how to be a caretaker for our inner life. We have a beautiful, wonderful potential within us. Every single one of us has it. There is no doubt that we have beauty inside.

We don't often take time to recognize, allow, or evoke the beauty. Sometimes, we are reactive because we don't take time or are in a hurry. We become caught up in greed, hatred, and delusion, and unskillful things arise. Sometimes those are maintained. They become habits. We try to develop different habits or default settings in the Dharma from which to live our lives.

These four right efforts are the overarching way to care for this heart and our inner well-being. This takes mindfulness. It takes awareness to track what is going on in our minds. We want to be able to recognize in a skillful way when we are unskilled.

One of the important arts of this practice is recognizing things we do that are not salutary. We want to see the things we don't feel good about or are unfortunate and unskillful. How can we use mindfulness to be aware of that skillfully, so we don't cause more harm?

It can be a bit of a delight when we get the hang of this. When we feel something about ourselves that is off – that is a foible, that is not quite right, or that may have caused harm to ourselves, or others – can be a bittersweet delight. We try to be aware of things about ourselves we don't feel good about, or that do not seem right with kindness, openness, and non-reactivity. We try to make space for it and hold it graciously saying, "That is how it is."

When I was a newer student, I was inspired by how some of the most senior, mature Buddhist practitioners talked about themselves. They would be very honest about their inner life, which was difficult for them. When they spoke about their inner life, it was inspiring how utterly undefended, relaxed, open, non-judgmental, and honest they were. They would share what they were working with, and what was going on for them. Sometimes they would get angry, and they would work with the anger. They were trying not to be angry, and not to make it a problem for themselves. They weren't judging themselves for it. They just acknowledged, "Oh, there's anger and I'm working with it."

Part of Buddhist practice is an honest assessment of ourselves. Buddhism should not be a recourse to only see ourselves as wonderful, special, and all good. To do this is to become partial. To become whole, we want to see all of what we are – the good, the bad, the ugly, and the beautiful. That is where we can find our freedom. That is the movement that is onward leading. This is a very important Buddhist word – onward leading to freedom and greater goodness.

We start by training ourselves to see. We want to look, to see, "Oh, that wasn't so good." In the monastery, a big part of my training was to look at my anger. I would sit in meditation for many, many hours with anger. I would just sit there and look at it.

Certainly, in the beginning, I was reactive to it and discouraged by it. My self-worth suffered. Over time, I learned to sit with it. I sat with sadness, guilt, anger, and fear. I held it broadly and openly. I did not make it a problem. I started to feel whole with these things.

We see what is going on inside of us. We know that we have a tendency to do unkind, unskillful, and even harmful things. Because of that honesty, we then do two things. We practice with the first of the two right efforts. The first is to find a way to prevent these things from arising.

Very simply, it could be that we know we have a problem with candy. We tend to eat a lot of candy, which is unhealthy for us. We feel lousy afterward. Perhaps, don't bring candy home, or don't go down the supermarket aisle where the candy is. Avoiding places where we are tempted is a way of preventing something unwholesome from arising. Sometimes that is a very wise thing to do.

It could be we are going someplace that we know will be challenging. Someone will be there that makes us angry or afraid or something. It is wise to prepare before we go. We know if we are tired, hungry, or stressed out, it can be hard when we are there. Our reactivity may arise. We prepare ourselves for this. We meditate, eat well, and are well-rested. We might go for a walk beforehand. When we arrive, we are in a relatively good space. We are creating conditions where we are less likely to have these unskillful states arise.

In the depth of Buddhist practice, we are looking for an equanimity and freedom where we see how things arise and pass. We see things coming and going. We see the constant flow of change. In being relaxed, open, and present, we become sensitive to the flow of change and inconstancy of life. There can be a kind of overview or space where we can see difficult things arise. We don't pick them up. We see them as part of the river of life, or the flow of change. We see how they come and go.

Someone says something to us that is unkind. There is enough presence of mind to see it as something that arises and goes. There is nothing inside the mind that wants to pick it up. The words encounter nothing, they don't strike against anything in the mind. The words just go right through. To have a presence of mind with equanimity, and clarity of mindfulness is another way of preventing these unwholesome, unskillful states from arising.

When they do arise, the practice is to let go of them. Some people say letting go is hard. Some people don't understand how to let go. The Buddha said that it's actually easier to let go than it is to prevent. There is something about preventing which is harder. It may take a stronger mind, and a stronger sense of being grounded in open mindfulness to be free enough so these things don't arise.

Letting go is often something we must do. There are two things related to letting go. One is if we are holding on tight to something, release the grip. If we release the grip on our heartstrings, the strings will start vibrating. They will make nice music again. If we are preoccupied with certain thoughts or resentments about someone, we may feel where that holding is. There may be tightening in the forehead, the temples, the jaws, or the chest. To feel the physicality of contracting around some idea or feeling helps let go. Then we might relax the body. We might be able to relax the grip we have on our ideas and thoughts.

So, learn to let go. We develop the skill of letting go. We start in small ways. We slowly start building and building until we let go of the big difficult things. A small thing might be when we are driving a car, and we come up against a red light. We feel impatient. Being impatient doesn't really help the light to turn green faster. Maybe we can let go of the impatience. We can be relaxed, and open, and be present in a calm way until the light changes. We can practice letting go in small places like that. Then we grow.

The other aspect of abandoning unskillful states is called restraint. It is not a very popular idea in the United States. It is traditionally popular in Buddhism. It is in the teachings of the Buddha and handed down through the centuries. It is understood that all kinds of unwholesome, maybe even harmful impulses will arise. There is no need to feel bad about that if we don't give in to them.

We do not want to pick them up and act on them. The ability to let these things be and not pick them up, act on them, and not be pushed into speaking or doing because of them is called restraint. That is considered to be a tremendous safeguard, and protection for us and the world around us. Sometimes it is a lot less painful to practice restraint than to try to clean up afterward when we've said something unkind.

In summary, the first two of these four right efforts are the effort to prevent unskillful or unwholesome states from arising. If they do arise, learn to let go of them. To do this we must learn to recognize when unwholesome states are here. We must look inside and see what are not necessarily our best qualities. We do this with lots of generosity, openness, kindness, and willingness. "Yes. Okay, this too, is here."

We do not need to define ourselves or feel bad about ourselves because of these states. This self-honesty is actually a very good personal quality to have. "Oh, it's like this." Being amused by yourself can make it easier to be honest. Be amused by all the shenanigans that go on inside. "Wow, that's quite something happening in there." That might break some of the trance or the strong identification we have around some of these negative states that can happen.

We can turn to kindness or amusement for support. I hope the idea of honestly assessing where we are and learning wisely and happily to avoid, prevent, and let go of unskillful actions is developed. Over time, we learn that this is one of the great arts of a wise life. It is an art that allows us to come into wholeness because the unskillful states tend to be states that come out of our being divided or disconnected from ourselves.

So, I hope that you move in the direction of greater wholeness and goodness. I hope that you find it valuable to practice the first two right efforts. Thank you.

