

Eightfold Path - Right Effort (3 of 3)

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

develop, skillful, healthy, kindness, unhealthy, habit, generosity, freedom, states, paramis, 10 perfections.

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Today I will give the third talk on right effort. This will be about the effort to evoke skillful, wholesome states and actions. It will look at maintaining or protecting the wholesome and skillful activities that we are involved in. These include activities of mind, body, and speech.

One of the most natural things about life is that if all the appropriate conditions are met, a living being, a human being that is born will grow. We will grow physically, mentally, emotionally. It is delightful to watch a young child grow, develop, learn skills, and learn how to walk and talk. As they grow up, they learn how to navigate the world. They find their way and eventually become independent and are able to take care of themselves.

It is a completely natural phenomenon to watch this growth. We can't really stop it. If we keep feeding and caring for a young child, we can't stop them from growing. They just grow.

That growing and maturing of human beings, the unfolding, and movement continues into adulthood. It isn't that at 18 or 21 something gets turned off, and we never mature again. We continue to mature and develop psychologically, emotionally, and intellectually. This happens even if we do not think we're still maturing and growing.

There are all kinds of influences on how that evolving, and growing happens. Some of them are not so healthy. The influence of media, community, society, advertisers, and politicians can skew a person toward unhealthy mind-states. Those states will grow and develop.

We might start with the tendency towards a little bit of hostility. It can get fueled and fed by the repetition of conditions that become habits. It can become full-blown hate. Someone else has conditions or situations where the positive unfolds and develops. They will grow in that direction.

If we don't do anything; if we make no choices; and if we don't take any responsibility for what influences us and the direction our habit formations grow, other people who are paid a lot of money will try to influence us. Many in society will try to affect how our mind streams develop.

Meditation provides a place to start being wise, attentive, and discerning about which of these two directions we go. Do we go in a skillful direction or an unskillful direction? Do we move in a wholesome, helpful direction conducive to happiness, well-being, and deep peace? Do we move toward the opposite?

Simply be mindfully present for your experience. Practice not doing anything else but being mindfully present. Practice not having positive thoughts. Do not promote more kindness or try to develop yourself in any way. Let go of self-improvement projects. Just be mindful. Encourage the habit of continually being mindful and letting go of self-improvement projects. That by itself can be healthy and wholesome. It is like a magnet and can bring with it the development of healthy things. This is partly because it interrupts the flow, and the influence of unhealthy thoughts, choices, and ways of being.

When the unhealthy things are interrupted, stopped, and put to rest for a while, there is a lot more room for a different kind of sensitivity to be there. There is a tendency then to allow what is good and what is healthy. There is space for what feels good, freeing, kind, and compassionate. There is a feeling of gravitation or space for it to operate.

There's a space for wisdom to operate and come about. The more clearly we see, the more we can get out of the way of our experience and just be there. There can be a lot of wisdom and freedom. There is the wisdom of how we get caught and how not to be caught. That makes a world of difference. Simple mindfulness develops wisdom because it is a very skillful thing by itself.

We can choose to redirect our mind stream, not out of greed, hatred, expectations, or conceit. We can choose to redirect our mind stream in healthy ways. If we find ourselves going along in our day and starting to have a lot of mean thoughts, it might be possible to let go of them. It might be appropriate to start thinking about things we appreciate naturally and easily – not artificially. Instead of following along with this negative bias that many human beings seem to have, we can reinforce the positive bias, the positive side of things.

It is not to pretend that everything is good. We don't want to avoid understanding the difficulties and what is unhealthy in life. We do not want that to influence us. We want to be influenced by the positive side – the healthy, supportive side. In the Eightfold Path, we want to be influenced by that which is freeing and frees us from suffering. Suffering is not necessary. Understanding this can be very difficult.

This entire Eightfold Path is oriented in a healthy direction. The whole path is skillful. As we engage in the different parts of the Eightfold Path, we begin to recondition the mind and create different habits and different conditioning that support a healthy, skillful way of thinking.

In this right effort that the Buddha talks about, we first try to evoke or bring about skillful states. We start being mindful. For example, we might think that kindness is a good idea. Maybe we should think about where we already have kindness. Where is it natural for us to be friendly? Oh, yeah, we have this good friend. When we think of our friend, we just feel warm and kind. We get a smile in our hearts. So, we move our minds to what already brings kindness or compassion.

From there we see if the kindness or compassion might spread. Can there be more friendliness? Can we find a place inside where we evoke friendliness toward a person, we normally don't feel friendly towards? Maybe we can feel the kindness privately. We don't have to tell them. We begin to experiment, stretch, and open to a kind and friendly way of being supported by the Eightfold Path.

This means being supported by the idea of developing kindness, friendship, and friendliness without any clinging. This occurs without any suffering, stress or strain. Remember, this is not a should, or an obligation. Rather, it is a kind of inspiration to be freer, and to breathe more easily.

How is it that we can breathe more easily when we are kind and compassionate? We feel more at ease. That is the art of making it more skillful.

Generosity is also a skillful thing – to live a generous life. Let generosity be a habit. It is not a burden or a stress, but a way that is freeing. It's like "Oh, of course I'll be generous because that's good for me. I just feel so much easier. My breath becomes easier and more relaxed. My chest becomes more open. My mind opens up and I'm not so narrow in my mind when I'm generous." We try to learn that.

Patience is skillful. Learning the art of letting go is skillful and healthy. Equanimity. Learning to develop a sense of resolve and a little bit of determination or aspiration. "Yes, this is important, I want to follow through and have the strength here to do it."

All kinds of inner qualities of the mind will develop in the wake of practicing mindfulness meditation. Or as we recognize them in ourselves, we can evoke them more often. We can tap into them and let them be a companion in our lives. Let them be what influences, inspires, and changes us for the better.

Once we have aroused these mind states, we practice recognizing, maintaining, and protecting them. That doesn't mean that we hold tight and guard them against all things at all costs. It can be very simple. Once we start feeling more calm, mindful, present, or at home in ourselves, we start to safeguard this. We don't give it up easily. We don't rush to see what the latest news is and lose touch with this deeper sense of wholeness.

Take your time. Start living at the speed of ease, the speed of freedom. We learn what it is like to lose that freedom by rushing and doing too many things. We get anxious and spin off in our thoughts. The speed of our freedom – it doesn't mean that we go slow, but it does mean we stay close to this freedom. With that freedom, we can protect some of these good qualities. We can protect qualities of kindness, compassion, care, patience, love, generosity, determination, and aspiration.

There are all these good qualities that we have. There is an abundance of them. If we want to get more familiar and develop a vocabulary of good skillful qualities, then we might want to learn about the 10 paramis, or the 10 perfections. These are 10 particularly valued inner dispositions, qualities, and mental states that the Buddhist tradition values. Simply learning them starts creating the condition to evoke and arouse skillful states. Then we learn the art of protecting them without it being a strain. We protect them without it being a duty or without putting blinders on and avoiding the full range of what's happening in this world.

May it be that this eightfold path and right effort becomes the most natural thing in the world for us. May it not be something we do as a should or something that is a strain for us. Let it be the opposite. May we do it because we love it. It makes us freer, more ourselves, and more at ease. May we become a gift to the world. May our ease, our freedom, and our peace, be a gift to all the people we meet.

Thank you.