

Four Noble Efforts

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How do we care for ourselves? Maybe that is a topic for today, but the explicit topic is: I want to talk about what is called in Buddhism the *four noble efforts*, the *four right efforts*. It is usually presented very simplistically, partly because of the way it is worded. The ancient teachings on these four efforts are so convoluted with double negatives and repeating a lot of words that they maybe seem technical or complicated. How do you make sense of these sentences? At least, that is how it was for me when I was first introduced to them.

For many years as a teacher, I just ignored this teaching. That is a convenient thing to do when you do not know what to do with it. But I think it is actually a very important teaching and very profound. Sometimes it is presented very simplistically by the tradition, maybe to make it easier for people. But the simplistic way of teaching it may contribute to the idea that there are a lot of shoulds: you should not do this, and you should do this, and you better get on with it. It can feel kind of jarring, almost, if that is how it is taken in.

So it is said that whatever is unwholesome, whatever is unskillful, whatever is unhealthy to do, prevent yourself from doing it. Stop doing it if you are doing it. Whatever is wholesome, skillful, healthy to do, start doing it and keep doing it. Well, I know I said it in a way that maybe was a little bit jarring to make the point. I hope I did not jar you too much. But it is just like, you know, it is a lot of work. It is like the should, and it just kind of does not come across very well.

At the heart of it, in the way the original complicated teaching is taught, is something very beautiful, very profound. It is knowing that there is a treasure, knowing there is something really beautiful and profound here that we want to protect, enhance, and support. The example I would like to use to begin this discussion is that I walk here on Sunday mornings from my house.

There was this wonderful little moment walking down the sidewalk. There was an open car door just in front of the walkway out of a house, and the little gate into the property was open. There was a mother, and she was talking across the sidewalk to her little daughter, who I did not see. The car door was open, and she was sitting in the car. My guess is that the daughter was maybe four years old, somewhere in that range. She certainly knew how to talk.

So I heard the daughter delightfully talking about something like, as far as I could tell, the dirt on the sidewalk. That was the important topic, and she was delighted and happy, talking about the dirt as if it were a natural wonder, almost. The mother responded in kind. The mother was there and just kind of, “Yes, and, well, it’s a piece of dirt, and wow,” you know. It was just delightful.

As I was walking further down the sidewalk, I thought, “Oh, this is an example of what I want to teach today.” You have this little girl who is in this beautiful state of wonder and clarity and delight, and is in relationship with her mother around something. It does not really matter what, but it was this little dirt on the sidewalk, something incidental. That is something to treasure. That is something to appreciate, to go along with, maintain, support, and keep going.

I was challenged to do the very same thing when my kids were that age, four or five. I do not think I made any big mistakes, but I remember taking my son up our little walkway to our car. He would stop in wonder to look at the flowers. “Wow, the flower! Look at that.” It was like this was the most important thing in the world.

Yes, but there was also the carpool to get to. There were people in the other carpool waiting for us. You know, we have to get to the carpool. So what is the most important thing here? Do I just let everyone wait for him to finish admiring the flowers? Do I somehow redirect him? How do I care for this situation?

Certainly, if I had yelled at him or yanked at him, or if that mother had said to that girl sitting in the car, “Shut up! I’m late. We have to go,” that would have closed something down. That would have lost something, a treasure. So the same thing is true for ourselves. At some point, we discover that we are a treasure. We have something inside ourselves as a treasure.

This teaching on the four right efforts—the word for right is a Pāli word, *sammā*, and *sammā* is a much richer word than the English word right. Right implies wrong, which kind of puts us in this maybe dualistic world or moralistic world, puritanical world, of right and wrong, what we should and should not do. The word *sammā* means something more like consummate, whole, or complete. Something becomes complete in us, and then, in that completeness,

we feel some treasure. We feel something valuable and important that we want to somehow support and maintain.

The original idea of the *Noble Eightfold Path*, in which the teachings on the four right efforts appear, probably was not meant for beginners in Buddhism. It was not, “People just beginning, this is what you should do. These are the right things to do.” Rather, it was a description of people who were maturing in the practice. In the maturing of the practice, they had discovered something complete, something wonderful, something that was a treasure in their own hearts, minds, and being. It was now as valuable in oneself as that delightful four-year-old girl talking about the dirt.

That can take a long time in coming, to discover in ourselves. But sooner or later, as people mature in this practice, the idea is that at some point something shifts inside. Something becomes whole. Something becomes healed. Something grows and matures in such a way that we feel, “This is valuable. This is good. This is precious. This is beautiful. This is sweet.”

This is something that needs to be. It feels like there is a reverence to it, or it feels like there is a sense that this is valuable. This is sacred, even, some people would say. Something about how the mind gets turned inside out from its anxieties, fears, and desires allows the mind to become not fragmented, not divided against itself, not limited, not preoccupied. The mind kind of fills out to fill itself with peace and well-being, or the heart is that way.

The heart is not constricted, not tight, not closed. The heart becomes open. The heart becomes soft, becomes sweet. It becomes a reservoir of peace, well-being, and safety. And wow, this is cool. This is something.

For someone who has matured in practice, then, just as it was natural, I would say, I hope, for that mother to respond in kind to the little girl in that sweet little way that I saw in that conversation, at some point it becomes natural for us to respond to ourselves. We respond to this good heart we have, this good mind we have, and be in conversation with that. We care for it and tend to it. We begin considering: How do we support this? How do we allow this to grow?

The initial maturation like this in Buddhist practice is just the beginning of how mature we can become in Buddhist inner life. So it is useful to know that some of us are maybe at least four-year-olds in the Dharma. We begin with something here that we want to care for and grow. We do not want to ignore it or say, “Shut up.” We do not want to override it, because if we get preoccupied in our hostility, envy, greed, conceit, or self-criticism, we are somehow limiting or even harming this four-year-old, if I may say that, in ourselves that is growing in

the Dharma. It is something really beautiful.

So we come to a threshold, a turning point, or a tipping point in the Dharma, where we start recognizing that there is something in us that is an important resource, an important reference point, an important kind of thing to care for. How do we care for it? We care for it by remembering it. We care for it by being reminded of it or staying close to it. We care for it by somehow encouraging it along.

This is what I want to read to you now. I will read it a few times, so you do not have to understand it the first time. Do not try to understand it the first time that I read it. It starts off by using the key thing, which is what is unwholesome. I love the English word “unwholesome.”

The wholesome and unwholesome, because at least in the English etymology of the word, means belonging to the whole, or belonging to what is not whole—that is divided or limited. So this idea is that we want to live a life that is whole, that all of ourselves is included, so that we can care for all of it equally and mature in it. Part of this begins with the idea that there is this beautiful mind that we can have, this beautiful way of being, that has a certain desire.

The word desire is sometimes considered a bad word in Buddhist English. That word was never bad in the teachings of the Buddha. The word in Pāli is *chanda*, and *chanda* could be seen as a neutral word. But often, when it is not qualified by something unwholesome, it always implies wholesome desire. Desire is maybe a little bit limited, because the ancient teaching says that whatever *chanda* is, it is the desire that gets us to act.

It is not an idle desire. It is a motivating desire that gets us off our seat, our butt, you know, to do something. We want something to happen. What it is saying here is this: this beautiful mind we have is not a passive mind. It is alive. It is vital. It can be. It can have motivations. It can want something.

So that mother talking to her little girl, I might guess it was not so logically thought out. She did not say, “Wait a minute. As the girl talks about the dirt in the sidewalk, just a minute here. I have to look up my parent manual and look at the different criteria that need to be fulfilled, so I know how to respond to you. It just takes five minutes, and just be quiet. Shut up.”

I would say that, in the right circumstances, stress-free circumstances on a Sunday morning, the mother had this natural instinct, natural desire coming out of her beautiful love for the child. She had this desire to speak and act in this simple, supportive, equal way with the daughter. There was a beautiful desire coming out of that good heart, her love. So the same thing can happen with us. This beautiful mind that we start tapping into through this practice,

sooner or later, can have a natural desire in it, a wholesome desire.

So here is what it says: “A practitioner takes up.” I am going to simplify it still. A practitioner takes up and holds up a mind that gives rise to this kind of desire. So, if you have a love for the child, understand, “Oh, now is a time to bring this to the forefront. Let me stop everything else I’m doing. This is a special moment with this child.”

Maybe they were late for something, but the parent could see, given the circumstances, that it was okay to be late. Right now, this is what I should take up. I should take up the love for the child. I should take up the presence of mind, the presence of heart, to be with her. That is what I should do. That is where I should be right now.

If a practitioner of the Dharma knows something about their own inner goodness, inner wholeness, inner peace, love, or care, knows something that is here, it might not always be present, but they might realize, “Oh, now is a time to pick it up. Now is a time to hold it up. Now is a time to stay close to it.” It is not meant to be a should. It is not meant to be work. The reference point is the opposite of work. The reference point is a desire that initiates, just the heart’s wish.

The heart wants this. Shouldn’t we kind of listen to the heart’s wish? What is your deepest wish? What is your heart’s deepest desire? I would argue that, in the context of that sidewalk conversation that I saw, I would not be surprised if, at that moment, the deepest desire in the heart of that mother was just to be there for her daughter for this precious little exchange. Who knows what background they have had? Maybe the mother is hardly ever there. She is busy working, and this was an opportunity to connect that was invaluable and rare for her.

So she thought, “Oh, this is the time to take hold of this desire, this mind that has this desire, and to act on this desire.” This is the most natural thing to do. It did not require a parent manual. It just required being sensitive to the heart’s wish. So a practitioner takes up and holds up this kind of mind, a mind giving rise to a desire.

Here, the emphasis is having a desire. This is not about letting go of all desires. This is allowing a certain desire to be born, a healthy desire. I would say a natural desire. For what? This is the double negatives, so prepare yourself. Put on your seatbelts.

“Desire for the non-arising of non-arisen unwholesome mental states.” Do you see why? In more plain English, it means that if you are not doing—if your mind does not have something unwholesome going on—stay close to that mind that wants to not have those arise. That is what it is saying.

If the mother is talking to her daughter and feels this, it says, “Stay close to that mind that has

a desire not to get sidetracked by her smartphone.” I do not think she was holding it, but I could imagine that some people have a habit of looking at their phone. You know, important things are there, and probably more important than their daughter, right? So the daughter is talking about dirt, and the dirt, well, that can wait. You know, I have to check for emails or texts or news or what is happening on Netflix. It is all these important things, right?

But no, she has a mind that wishes, “Let’s not be distracted by the phone. This is a time to be.” Let us not get distracted. Let us not go off someplace else. Let us not give birth to impatience or annoyance. Let us not do this.

So nothing unwholesome is happening, and there can be healthy desire: “Let’s stay this way. The girl wants mother’s attention. Let’s leave the phone alone. Let’s not get distracted. Let’s not get caught up in being efficient in the drive and being there,” you know. I do not know all the kinds of things where it is easy to get annoyed, upset, angry, or impatient. Let us not do that before those things arise. Let us think this through here.

This complicated sentence is more complicated, but the emphasis of the sentence is really: do this seriously. Really give yourself to it. Put initiative into this direction. This is not a passive thing. So here it goes: “A practitioner undertakes and strongly initiates the taking up and holding up of this good mind that gives rise to the heart’s wish for the non-arising of non-arisen unwholesome mental states.”

All those words turn out to be important as a way of saying that this is important. This is something we can give ourselves to, not as work, but with enthusiasm, with inspiration. In fact, some translators of English translate this word, *chando*, that is here translated as desire, as enthusiasm. Then we get a very different feeling for it. So that is the first effort.

The second one says all those things again, but this time for the abandoning of unwholesome states of mind that have arisen. So that mother is sitting talking, and she feels her impatience. There is a heart’s wish: “No, not now. I don’t need this. Let it go. Let it go.”

Letting go of unwholesome states is not puritanical. It is not judgmental. It is not that you are good or bad because you have it. It is very simple. The heart is so simple, so whole, so sensitive, so valuable, that of course there is a desire not to sully it. Of course there is a desire not to harm it. Of course there is that desire, that enthusiasm.

There is something better going on here than getting angry. What is that? What is better than getting angry? That is what a mature practitioner learns. As the practice deepens, we recognize there are better things to do. “Oh, let’s stay with what’s important. Let’s let go of the anger. That’s not needed right now. Something else is needed.”

Then it switches to the third and fourth right efforts. Now the focus is on wholesome mental states, wholesome mental ways of being. Because I said wholesome can mean whole, healed, beautiful, healthy, these are healthy states that we are starting to learn to recognize for ourselves. “Oh, this is good. This is really good.”

So a practitioner undertakes and strongly initiates the taking up and holding up of a mind, giving rise to enthusiasm for the arising of unarisen wholesome states. They are not there yet, but this good mind, this good way of being that we mature in this practice, knows there are better things here. Let’s give ourselves to it. Let’s arouse it. This is good.

Rather than being angry, let’s have love. Rather than being stingy, which just makes me feel tight and constricted, let me remember how good it is to be generous, and let’s be generous here. Let me arouse that generosity.

Then I love the fourth one. Because of how many verbs there are, those of you who do not do a lot of work, you know, this is a warning. All these four, six verbs are like, “Oh, oh.” But I see it as the enthusiasm being big. Now the heart’s wish is like, “Yes.” It is like a big yes.

One Buddhist teacher says this word for desire, *chanda*—Ajahn Sucitto, the famous English monk, says it is the heart’s yes. It is saying yes to this. “A practitioner undertakes and strongly initiates the taking up and holding up of a mind, giving rise to the enthusiasm for the continuation, non-forgetting, increase, abundance, cultivation, and fulfillment of arisen wholesome mental states.”

So if you have something good going, if you have a mental state that is good and valuable, you are allowed to have enthusiasm to maintain it. Unless you know something better to do. If you have something better to do, please. But if you have something really good going on already, stay close to it, protect it, maintain it, stay with it. If you are connected to this good heart, this good mind, do not give it up easily.

One of the great challenges I like to give people is: If you have a good state of mind coming out of meditation, for example, why do you give it up? For what do you sacrifice it? What are you attached to? What is it you want? What do you do that seems more important that might cause it?

Again, when I had young kids at home, that was back in the ancient world when we had this thing called paper newspapers that they would deliver to our house every day. I liked to read the newspaper at breakfast. That was nice enough, but I realized after a while, when you have to take the kids to school, get them dressed and fed, and everything that had to be done, I would be exhausted and stressed by the time I dropped them off for school. Something had

to change.

The thing that had to change was my attachment to reading the newspaper. I was willing to sacrifice my well-being because I really wanted the newspaper. Once I gave up the morning newspaper, the whole morning went smoothly. I was not protecting some desire I had that allowed the whole thing to go smoothly and easily, and I was a better parent.

So continue the wholesome. Do not forget about it. Let it grow. This is a special word: let it grow into an abundance. How often do you associate Buddhism with a sense of abundance? Let it fill you. There is the word fulfillment, which means in Pāli, let it fill you.

These are beautiful states that do not have to be incidental. They do not have to be partial. They can really fill us from the toes up to our head. They can fill our hearts. These are beautiful states that are worth developing and growing. Why? Because it is the heart's wish.

I think the beautiful thing that can happen eventually, as people mature in this practice of mindfulness, is that we are so present for ourselves, so sensitive and attentive to what is here, that we have a clear sense of what our good heart wants. We have a clear sense of how natural it is to let go of what harms it and to continue what supports it, what enlivens it.

So this is the teaching of the four right efforts. I hope that this made this teaching come alive for you and meaningful for you. I think of it as very important in Buddhism, this whole emphasis on wholesome and unwholesome: to grow in the wholesome, to shrink in the unwholesome. So that was what I have for today. We have some minutes before we usually break today for the potluck.