

Right Effort

Part of the Eightfold Path By Barbara O'Brien, About.com

Right Effort, sometimes called Right Diligence, is the sixth part of the Eightfold Path of Buddhism. The Buddha taught that the Eightfold Path is the means to realize enlightenment. Right Effort (in Pali, *samma vayamo*), along with Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration, make up the mental discipline section of the Path.

The most basic, traditional definition of Right Effort is to exert oneself to develop wholesome qualities and release unwholesome qualities. As recorded in the Pali Canon, the Buddha taught there are four aspects to Right Effort. Very simply --

The effort to prevent unwholesome qualities -- especially greed, anger and ignorance -- from arising.

The effort to extinguish unwholesome qualities that already have arisen.

The effort to cultivate skillful, or wholesome, qualities -- especially generosity, loving kindness, and wisdom (the opposites of greed, anger and ignorance) -- that have not yet arisen.

The effort to strengthen the wholesome qualities that have already arisen.

Supporting the Eightfold Path

If you look at the entire Eightfold Path, you can see how Right Effort supports the other seven parts. The Eightfold Path is:

Right View

Right Intention

Right Speech

Right Action

Right Livelihood

Right Effort

Right Mindfulness

Right Concentration

It's important to understand that the Eightfold Path is not a series of progressive steps you master one at a time. Each aspect of the path supports every other aspect, and to practice any one aspect properly requires the practice of the other seven aspects. For example, if we look at what the Buddha said about Right Effort, we can see that it includes cultivating wisdom, which supports Right View. Developing wholesome qualities while purifying oneself of unwholesome qualities supports the ethical practice section of the Path, which is Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood.

Practice "Right," Not Hard

You might think Right Effort means practicing hard, but that's not necessarily so. Do not forget the Middle Way, between extremes. Don't force yourself to endure aesthetic practices or push yourself to exhaustion. If your practice becomes a "chore," that's a problem. Zen teacher Thich Nhat Hanh says, "The Fourfold Right Diligence is nourished by joy and interest. If your practice does not bring you joy, you are not practicing correctly."

The Buddha taught that practice should be like a well-tuned string instrument. If the strings are too loose, they won't play a sound. If they are too tight, they will break. Practice should be nourishing, not draining.

The Five Hindrances

The Eightfold Path

Triratna Buddhist Community New York City

When I think of Right Effort I also think of the Five Hindrances, from the Nivarana Sutta of the Pali Canon. These are:

Sensual desire (kamacchanda)
Ill will (vyapada)
Sloth, torpor, or drowsiness (thina-middha)
Restlessness and worry (uddhacca-kukkucca)
Doubt, Uncertainty or skepticism (vicikiccha)

These are five qualities that interfere with Right Effort. The Buddha taught that mindfulness -- of body, sensations, feelings and thoughts -- will overcome the hindrances.

What is the Dharma? P 150 Sangharakshita

When we considered **virya** as one of the seven factors of Enlightenment, it is defined by Shantideva in the Bodhicharyavatara, the 'Guide to the Career of the Bodhisattva', as '**energy in pursuit of the good**.' Energy in the usual sense of the word - as applied to people who dance all night or pursue money and power vigorously - is not virya at all. Virya is energy applied to the goal of nirvana.

Virya can be of two kinds - objective and subjective. The objective aspect of virya consists in doing things to help others, things that may involve a certain amount of physical effort and trouble, even difficulty. In its subjective sense, that is, as applied to one's own mental content, it corresponds to samyak vyayama, right effort or Perfect Effort, the sixth step of the Noble Eightfold Path. Right effort consists of the 'four great efforts': firstly, the effort to eradicate unskillful states of mind; secondly, to prevent the arising of unskillful states that have not as yet arisen; thirdly, to maintain skillful states of mind that are already present; and fourthly, to bring forth skillful states that have yet to arise. This is the fourfold right effort. It is the effort to eliminate all unskillful states of mind, all states that are rooted in greed and hatred and bewilderment or delusion, and to cultivate all skillful states, all states rooted in generosity, love, and wisdom.

Both these aspects of virya, objective and subjective, need to be cultivated, as the Buddha himself never tired of pointing out. His discourses quite often get on to this subject of the importance of maintaining the momentum of one's practice. One presumes that he must have noticed his own followers tending to let things slide from time to time, to stop putting in the effort, to stagnate.

Outer achievements should be expressions of inner abundance, not compensation for inner poverty.

~ Sangharakshita