

# The Noble Eightfold Path: The Way to the End of Suffering

By Bhikkhu Bodhi

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## Chapter V - Right Effort (Samma Vayama)

The purification of conduct established by the prior three factors serves as the basis for the next division of the path, the division of concentration (*samadhikkhandha*). This present phase of practice, which advances from moral restraint to direct mental training, comprises the three factors of right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. It gains its name from the goal to which it aspires, the power of sustained concentration, itself required as the support for insight-wisdom. Wisdom is the primary tool for deliverance, but the penetrating vision it yields can only open up when the mind has been composed and collected. Right concentration brings the requisite stillness to the mind by unifying it with undistracted focus on a suitable object. To do so, however, the factor of concentration needs the aid of effort and mindfulness. Right effort provides the energy demanded by the task, right mindfulness the steadying points for awareness.

The commentators illustrate the interdependence of the three factors within the concentration group with a simple simile. Three boys go to a park to play. While walking along they see a tree with flowering tops and decide they want to gather the flowers. But the flowers are beyond the reach even of the tallest boy. Then one friend bends down and offers his back. The tall boy climbs up, but still hesitates to reach for the flowers from fear of falling. So the third boy comes over and offers his shoulder for support. The first boy, standing on the back of the second boy, then leans on the shoulder of the third boy, reaches up, and gathers the flowers.[36](#)

In this simile the tall boy who picks the flowers represents concentration with its function of unifying the mind. But to unify the mind concentration needs support: the energy provided by right effort, which is like the boy who offers his back. It also requires the stabilizing awareness provided by mindfulness, which is like the boy who offers his shoulder. When right concentration receives this support, then empowered by right effort and balanced by right mindfulness it can draw in the scattered strands of thought and fix the mind firmly on its object.

Energy (*viriya*), the mental factor behind right effort, can appear in either wholesome or unwholesome forms. The same factor fuels desire, aggression, violence, and ambition on the one hand, and generosity, self-discipline, kindness, concentration, and understanding on the other. The exertion involved in right effort is a wholesome form of energy, but it is something more specific, namely, the energy in wholesome states of consciousness directed to liberation from suffering. This last qualifying phrase is especially important. For wholesome energy to become a contributor to the path it has to be guided by right view and right intention, and to work in association with the other path factors. Otherwise, as the energy in ordinary wholesome states of mind, it merely engenders an accumulation of merit that ripens within the round of birth and death; it does not issue in liberation from the round.

Time and again the Buddha has stressed the need for effort, for diligence, exertion, and unflagging perseverance. The reason why effort is so crucial is that each person has to work out his or her own deliverance. The Buddha does what he can by pointing out the path to liberation; the rest involves putting the path into practice, a task that demands energy. This energy is to be applied to the cultivation of the mind, which forms the focus of the entire path. The starting point is the defiled mind, afflicted and deluded; the goal is the liberated mind, purified and illuminated by wisdom. What comes in between is the unremitting effort to transform the defiled mind into the liberated mind. The work of self-cultivation is not easy — there is no one who can do it for us but ourselves — but it is not impossible. The Buddha himself and his accomplished disciples provide the living proof that the task is not beyond our reach. They assure us, too, that anyone who follows the path can accomplish the same goal. But what is needed is effort, the work of practice taken up with the determination: "I shall not give up my efforts until I have attained whatever is attainable by manly perseverance, energy, and endeavor."[37](#)

The nature of the mental process effects a division of right effort into four "great endeavors":

1. to prevent the arising of unarisen unwholesome states;
2. to abandon unwholesome states that have already arisen;
3. to arouse wholesome states that have not yet arisen;
4. to maintain and perfect wholesome states already arisen.

The unwholesome states (*akusala dhamma*) are the defilements (see note at the end), and the thoughts, emotions, and intentions derived from them, whether breaking forth into action or remaining confined within. The wholesome states (*kusala dhamma*) are states of mind untainted by defilements, especially those conducing to deliverance. Each of the two kinds of mental states imposes a double task. The unwholesome side requires that the defilements lying dormant be prevented from erupting and that the active defilements already present be expelled. The wholesome side requires that the undeveloped liberating factors first be brought into being, then persistently developed to the point of full maturity. Now we will examine each of these four divisions of right effort, giving special attention to their most fertile field of application, the cultivation of the mind through meditation.

### **(1) To prevent the arising of unarisen unwholesome states**

Herein the disciple rouses his will to avoid the arising of evil, unwholesome states that have not yet arisen; and he makes effort, stirs up his energy, exerts his mind and strives.[38](#)

The first side of right effort aims at overcoming unwholesome states, states of mind tainted by defilements. Insofar as they impede concentration the defilements are usually presented in a fivefold set called the "five hindrances" (*pañcanivarana*): sensual desire, ill will, dullness and drowsiness, restlessness and worry, and doubt.[39](#)

The first effort to be made regarding the hindrances is the effort to prevent the unarisen hindrances from arising; this is also called the endeavor to restrain (*samvarappadhana*). The effort to hold the hindrances in check is imperative both at the start of meditative training and throughout the course of its development. For when the hindrances arise, they disperse attention and darken the quality of awareness, to the detriment of calm and clarity. The hindrances do not come from outside the mind but from within. They appear through the activation of certain tendencies constantly lying dormant in the deep recesses of the mental continuum, awaiting the opportunity to surface.

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### **(2) To abandon the arisen unwholesome states**

Herein the disciple rouses his will to overcome the evil, unwholesome states that have already arisen and he makes effort, stirs up his energy, exerts his mind and strives.[41](#)

Despite the effort at sense control the defilements may still surface. They swell up from the depths of the mental continuum, from the buried strata of past accumulations, to congeal into unwholesome thoughts and emotions. When this happens a new kind of effort becomes necessary, the effort to abandon arisen unwholesome states, called for short the endeavor to abandon (*pahanappadhana*):

He does not retain any thought of sensual lust, ill will, or harmfulness, or any other evil and unwholesome states that may have arisen; he abandons them, dispels them, destroys them, causes them to disappear.[42](#)

...

### **(3) To arouse unarisen wholesome states**

Herein the disciple rouses his will to arouse wholesome states that have not yet arisen; and he makes effort, stirs up his energy, exerts his mind and strives.[45](#)

Simultaneously with the removal of defilements, right effort also imposes the task of cultivating wholesome states of mind. This involves two divisions: the arousing of wholesome states not yet arisen and the maturation of wholesome states already arisen.

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### **(4) To maintain arisen wholesome states**

Herein the disciple rouses his will to maintain the wholesome things that have already arisen, and not to allow them to disappear, but to bring them to growth, to maturity, and to the full perfection of development; and he makes effort, stirs up his energy, exerts his mind and strives.[47](#)

Defilements: The origin of *dukkha* Buddha locates within ourselves, in a fundamental malady that permeates our being, causing disorder in our own minds and vitiating our relationships with others and with the world. The sign of this malady can be seen in our proclivity to certain unwholesome mental states called in Pali *kilesas*, usually translated "defilements." The most basic defilements are the triad of greed, aversion, and delusion. Greed (*lobha*) is self-centered desire: the desire for pleasure and possessions, the drive for survival, the urge to bolster the sense of ego with power, status, and prestige. Aversion (*dosa*) signifies the response of negation, expressed as rejection, irritation, condemnation, hatred, enmity, anger, and violence. Delusion (*moha*) means mental darkness: the thick coat of insensitivity which blocks out clear understanding. From these three roots emerge the various other defilements — conceit, jealousy, ambition, lethargy, arrogance, and the rest — and from all these defilements together, the roots and the branches, comes *dukkha* in its diverse forms: as pain and sorrow, as fear and discontent, as the aimless drifting through the round of birth and death.